

# cineACTION

**SHIFTING  
NARRATIVES**  
**EROTIC  
THRILLERS**

**VERONICA LAKE**  
**BACK ISSUE  
INDEX 1-55**

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# ISSUE 56

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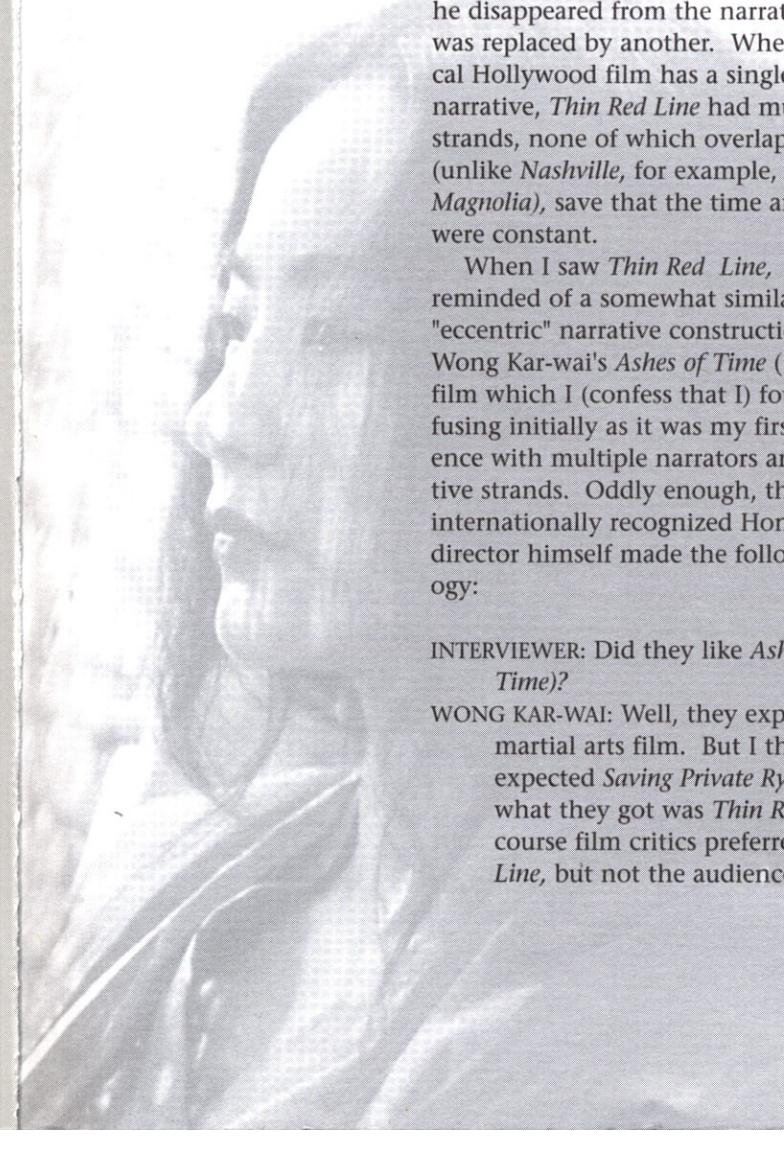
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## SHIFTING NARRATIVES



When Terrence Malick's *Thin Red Line* and Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* were released in 1998, the popular response was overwhelmingly in favor of the latter film over the former. Much of the enthusiastic discussion was directed at the brutal "reality" of Spielberg's representation of the battle scenes, and WWII veterans were trotted out to verify the authenticity of the recreated experience of being in battle. On the other hand, the response to *Thin Red Line* was mostly quizzical; from "why the focus on 'arty' closeups of insects and lizards in the middle of a war film?" to "Why the shift in protagonist?" Where the typical Hollywood film has a single protagonist with whom the audience is encouraged to identify, *Thin Red Line* kept switching from character to character. Just as the audience became involved in someone, he disappeared from the narrative and was replaced by another. Where the typical Hollywood film has a single linear narrative, *Thin Red Line* had multiple strands, none of which overlapped (unlike *Nashville*, for example, or even *Magnolia*), save that the time and place were constant.

When I saw *Thin Red Line*, I was reminded of a somewhat similar type of "eccentric" narrative construction in Wong Kar-wai's *Ashes of Time* (1994), a film which I (confess that I) found confusing initially as it was my first experience with multiple narrators and narrative strands. Oddly enough, the now-internationally recognized Hong Kong director himself made the following analogy:

INTERVIEWER: Did they like *Ashes (of Time)*?

WONG KAR-WAI: Well, they expected a martial arts film. But I think they expected *Saving Private Ryan* and what they got was *Thin Red Line*. Of course film critics preferred *Thin Red Line*, but not the audience.

In contrast, however, a recent posting on a film list (subscribed to by mainly university professors) claimed emphatically that the classic Hollywood narrative conventions were dead; that there was no sense in teaching them as such anymore, and consequently called for a revision of the pedagogical canon in light of this situation. If the reception of *Thin Red Line* (and *Ashes of Time*) is any indication, the "burial" is premature. While critics and professors might prefer the film that challenges the conventions, it would seem evident that the mass audience (and Hollywood) prefers the familiar linear narrative.

It is the above considerations which prompted the theme for this issue, Shifting Narratives, and the question at its core: Is there anything (narratively) different out there? The papers collected here are varied responses to that question. Several deal with films that indeed suspend narrative conventions; Dion Tubrett on the mind-boggling *Memento*, Robin Wood on its stylistic polar opposite, the comparatively ascetic *Flowers of Shanghai*, by the Taiwanese master filmmaker Hou Hsiao-hsien. Others investigate the ways in which narrative functions formally; Warren Buckland on *Wings of Desire*, Richard Rushton on *Gladiator*. Graeme Harper considers the question from the viewpoint of the (technological) impact on narrative apprehension by the viewer/user of DVDs. Doug Keesey's paper defines and describes a generic category, the Erotic Thriller, and Patricia Suchy gives us a doubled effort; an investigation of the cultural implications of *Veronica Lake* (and St. *Veronica*) as a veiled icon, in the form of a narrative that is itself constantly shifting.

On a personal note, I would like to thank Ilil Naveh for her assistance in assembling the index.

—Susan Morrison

# "SO WHERE ARE YOU?"

## On *Memento*, Memory, and the Sincerity of Self-Deception

### **"So where are you?"**

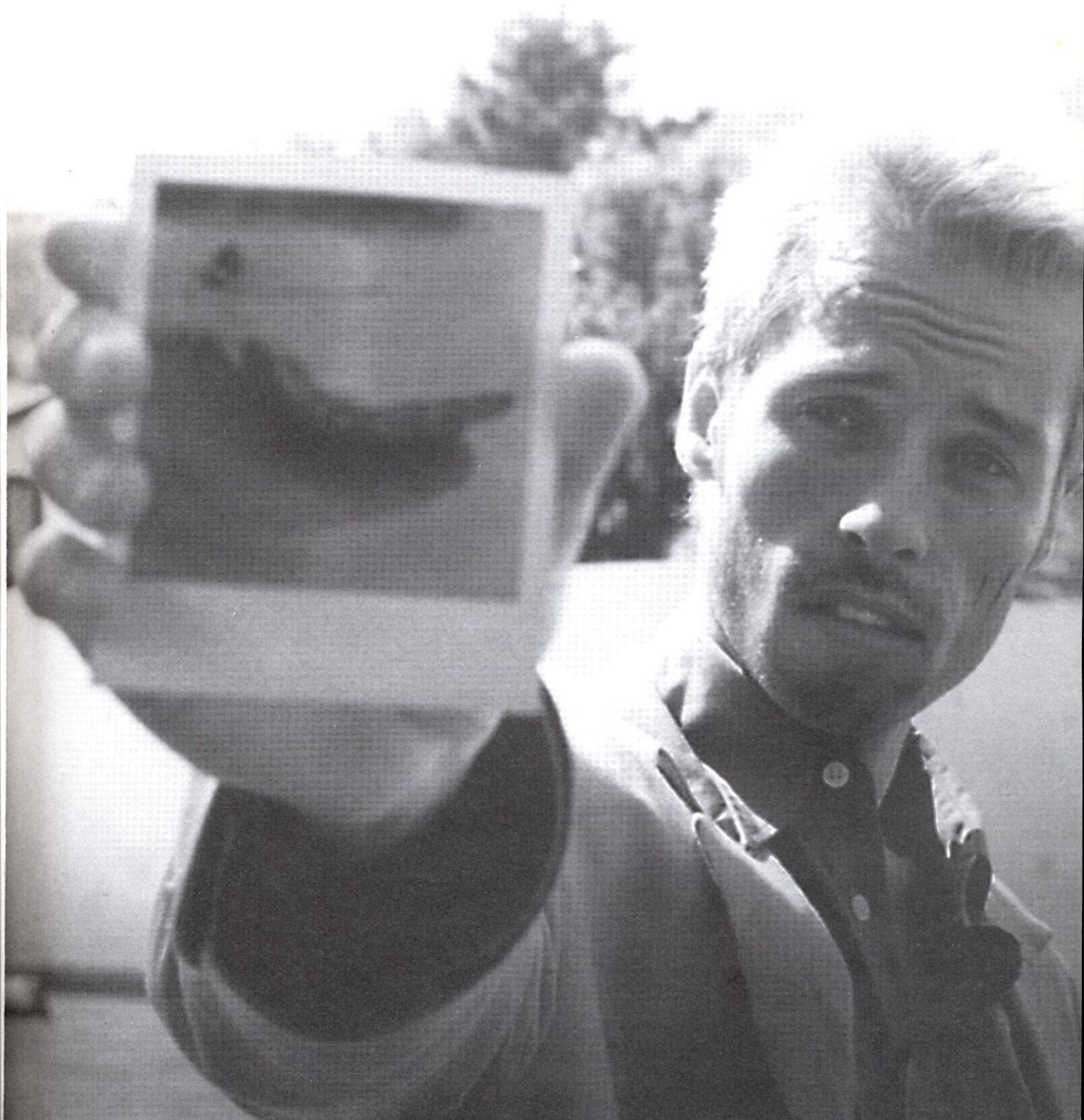
Leonard Shelby/Guy Pearce says as he begins his voice-over narration in the first of many black and white sequences in *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000). This sequence occurs immediately after the film's introductory sequence where Leonard murders a man, soon after recognized as Teddy/Joe Pantoliano, and photographs the result with a Polaroid snapshot. Yet this recounting is insufficient in describing the sequence of events which establish the narrative flow of *Memento*, a film that consistently proceeds in waves (15 minute memory shaped vignettes) each one successfully answering the cause for the previous scene's effect—and each remarkably (re/dis)orienting Leonard, who lives encased in these brief memory-episodes, as well as the audience sharing his experience. To introduce the formal linear inversion of the film, the initial sequence proceeds in reverse. Teddy's murder and its "evidence" (the Polaroid) start from its conclusion moving backward. The photographic red soaked image, shaken to quickly aid its development, slowly fades to white nothingness (comparable to Leonard's own mental processes). The murder moves in reverse motion where the death is undone and Teddy's last words, filled with aggressiveness and resentment offer puzzling and unsettling questions for Leonard which introduce the first of many doubts—doubts Leonard lives with because of his "condition" and which the audience identifying with him must interpret. In this essay I hope to work through *Memento* considering its generic and formal qualities and how they contribute to the processes of identification with the protagonist, and by extension the events of the film world, in the construction of memory—both as suspicion and therapy. With each narrative turn the film shifts interpretation and characterization to a state of unsettlement akin to Leonard's life. But this has at its centre the unspoken stability of Leonard himself, the one element that though most unstable is a point of stability (stability in that he is constantly unstable/ unaware of his environment). What's more, the close identification with Leonard and his role as victim and (a terribly flawed) moral saviour provides a stability that bridges the disparate encounters he faces. It is in attaching to Leonard's plight and his expressed drive that the most shocking revelation occurs; where identification clashes with identity and the film is reread (from memory) from its beginning (which is its conclusion).

### **"So where are you? You're in some motel room."**

Leonard wakes with a shock on a motel room bed; the film is now in black and white. The prior events seem almost dreamlike and the mundane (and peaceful) nature of this present shot of Leonard provides a sense of relief from the chaotic moments before. Was

by **Dion Tubrett**

Leonard with polaroid of his car.



the murder a dream or is this? The black and white sequences (this is the first of many) act as interludes between many of the narrative waves; they introduce Leonard and the workings of his fragmented mind. The jump from Leonard as murderer to a figure of close identification is achieved without much difficulty. His passive presence here, frightened and unaware, severely contrasts with the initial murder scene and identification with him is fostered through sharing the experience of his disorientation as well as plain curiosity. This is accomplished through the voice-over narration which persists throughout the film, eventually taking on the diegetically disguised form of a phone conversation. Voice-over narration, a device common to film noir protagonists who often recount their sordid tales (up to their mysterious and ill-fated present) in an elaborate flashback, takes on added resonance in this sequence and all that follow. It is common in film noir voice-overs for the protagonist to directly relate their experience in the first person. Walter Neff/Fred MacMurray in *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), to which *Memento* nods, begins his confession on a Dictaphone on camera which dissolves to his voice-over narration of the history of events: "It was mid-afternoon, and it's funny, I can still remember the smell of honeysuckle all along that block. I felt like a million. There was no way in all this world I could have known that murder sometimes can smell like honeysuckle." What is peculiar, and crucial, to *Memento*'s use of voice-over is that it begins, and predominantly remains, in the second person. Albeit, this shift is ambiguous—Leonard is asking himself the question hoping to quickly reorient himself. (He doesn't ask "So where am I?") But the question is phrased to immediately induct the audience into his mental world. Also curious when revisiting the film is that he asks "where" and not "who"—again, the confidence in his own identity (that the audience also accepts) becomes the cornerstone for the narrative revision that the film demands we make.

The space of these black and white sequences is frequently enclosed in motel rooms with Leonard explaining to himself (as well as a mysterious caller—a surrogate for the audience) his "condition" and motivation. The black and white motel spaces form a metaphoric foundation of self for Leonard (it is his empty mind—a space of anonymity and transition): cut off and secure from the rest of the chaotic and unknown world; explaining his past and his theory on how he productively functions. These black and white sequences, contrary to the rest of the film, do proceed in a conventional linear trajectory; they seem to exist in a non-space, the space of Leonard's mind, which acts as both his security (where he examines his files and tattoos—his mementoes) and the audience's exposition. But once again, the tragic (and shocking) irony is that this "foundation of self" is only a partial one (or perhaps a complete falsity) that Leonard does not recognize (or wish to recognize). This creates a devastating rupture for the audience where an assumed identity (Leonard's character and motivation) is understood and identified with but becomes challenged—and due to the closeness of identification a challenge to the audience's own conception of self. Yet the voice-over, Leonard's internal monologues that let him define himself and

by extension the viewer, is not confined to these black and white sequences. Nor is it, as has been indicated, solely voice-over. Leonard's phone conversation to a mysterious caller (perhaps Teddy? Definitely an audience surrogate who has no identity) extends this internal world outward. As well, Leonard engages in self-reflection, akin to the voice-over, in certain colour sequences. In his night with Natalie/Carrie-Ann Moss, Leonard lies awake talking to himself aloud recollecting his pain and uncertainty poignantly climaxing, "How can I heal if I can't feel time?" The combination of the voice-over narration, monologues (via the telephone) and soliloquies that spill out from the self-contained black and white space of the motel room have a twofold effect: it more greatly presents the world through Leonard's subjectivity where his mind permeates every element of the film world (a direct relation to the film's formal structure); and it more greatly encourages character identification (in that through these diverse modes of address Leonard attempts to order his world and this ordering, which places Leonard at its centre, continually strengthens the bond between audience and him).

**"So you're in some motel room ... you don't know how long you've been there, or how you got there ... Just some anonymous motel room. Won't tell you anything. Nothing in the drawers, but you look anyway. Nothing except the Gideon Bible."**

The connection to film noir has been briefly noted above. The filmmakers were conscious of situating *Memento* within this tradition.<sup>1</sup> The film's narrative, harkening back to previous classic film noir, includes the lone figure on the periphery of civil and ordered society navigating through a world of duplicity and corruption, attempting to solve a criminal mystery. Leonard acts as a moral barometer in the film. His conviction in the pursuit and judgement of the suspect (the mysterious "John G.") projects an almost holy resonance. Next to Leonard, a fallen figure who is psychically crippled from completing his dutiful (honourable?) task, the other characters appear evil, deceptive, and manipulative—this judgement, garnered from Leonard's subjectivity, is undermined by the film's conclusion. Leonard wishes not to so much to solve the murder of his wife (factually, that is, finally) to resolve it for his own emotional satisfaction as much as to avenge his wife, but his "condition", caused by the same murderer, prevents him from remembering the killer or his ongoing investigation. His "condition", anterograde amnesia, tragically hampers this full realization. "Well, yeah, but it's not amnesia. I remember everything from before my injury, I just can't make any new memories," Leonard explains. His "condition" places him on this periphery, psychically, and structures the film according to his mental processes. Leonard occupies a space in the narrative framework as both investigator and victim. He is initially presented as thoughtful and troubled in his role as executioner—his murderous impulse only aligned with the moral judgement against his wife's murderer. Teddy jokingly says to him that "You're not a killer, Lenny. That's why you're so good at it." In an attempt to maintain a focus in his task and some mastery over his chaotic world he relies on his photographs and notes,

attempting to avoid his role as victim. To bolster confidence in his own judgement (as well as comically referencing the film noir tradition of the detective on a case), he uses his photographs like a police badge, becoming at once a symbol of his power (in producing documents/ facts) and a definition of self ("My car.")

**"You can only feel details. Bits and pieces which you didn't bother to put into words. And extreme moments you feel even if you didn't want to. Put it together and you get the feel of a person, enough to know how much you miss them, and how much you hate the person who took them away."**

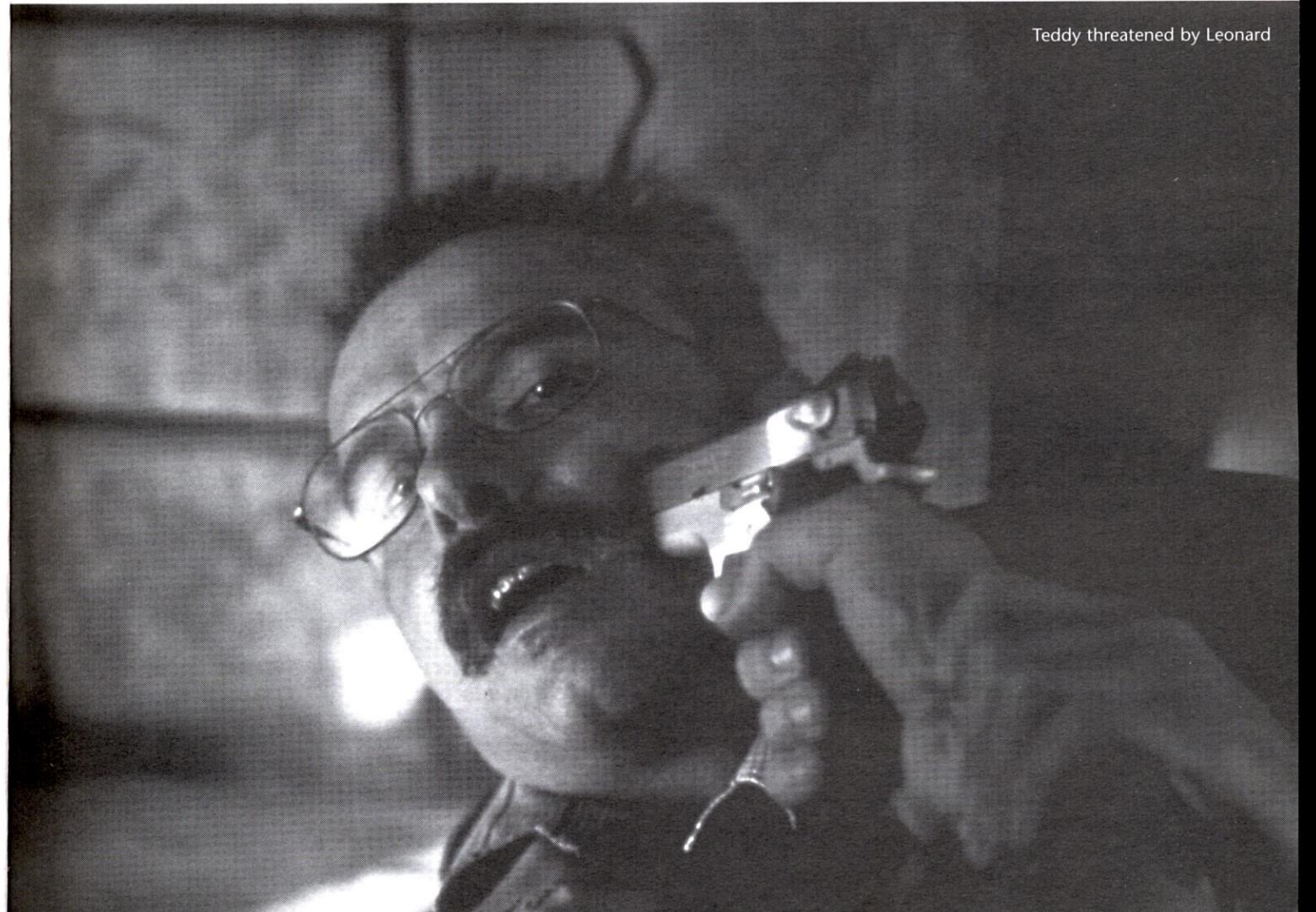
The flashback structure, a common characteristic of film noir such as in the aforementioned *Double Indemnity*, is the stylistic crux of *Memento*. Noir flashbacks have been categorized into two types: investigative, which "examine the past to solve a crime. It then leads us through a maze of clues and false leads constructed within the flashbacks"; confessional, which is "characterized by the protagonist's retrospective examination of the ways he was introduced to his current criminality."<sup>2</sup> *Memento* engages with these two types of flashback simultaneously. Except that in this film, the crime to be 'solved' is appar-

ently solved with the opening execution and the film retraces the path to this event. Also, the "retrospective examination" is accomplished through the film's episodic structure, yet the examination does not include the protagonist, the one person who cannot remember the history of events. Further, flashback is not the appropriate term for the effect of the narrative strategy on the film. Flashback implies a continuous history where the present bridges with the past, whereas in this film each segment is represented as an isolated present. Part of the disequilibrium experienced by Leonard and the audience is the spontaneous and disjoined nature of events (if they exist in a history, it is only of the present, for the past, as the film remarkably demonstrates, is only a construction). If the film's structure achieves anything, it is a progressive yet tempered movement "back into the present"—and it is the constant realignment to the present that is the source of confusion and fascination. That being the case, traditional flashbacks still do occur, notably with Leonard's remembering his wife and the attack. But these conventional flashbacks that provide a sense of stability and history for Leonard become problematized for

1 Chuck Stephens, "Past Imperfect," *Filmmaker* 9.2 (2001): 86.

2 Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 172.

Teddy threatened by Leonard





Leonard and Natalie

the audience by the film's conclusion—the reorganizing and reinterpretation of events is extended to these flashbacks. Are these flashbacks authentic or reconstructed? And is there a difference in memory?

Other connections to film noir, apart from the overall sense of suspicion and paranoia found in a corrupt urban world, are present in characterization. Leonard's past job where he met Sammy Jankis/Stephen Tobolowsky, a person with anterograde amnesia, was as an insurance investigator. This allusion to *Double Indemnity*'s insurance fraud connects Leonard into this world where his job has him uncovering duplicity by seeing it everywhere; it posits Leonard in his past life, a life he still wishes to connect with, as one of those detective/investigators that resurface within film noir. Another sad wave of irony is produced in that the duplicity he (thought he) could identify in his past now surrounds him while he maintains a naïveté that cannot distinguish others' deception from self-deception. If Leonard is, in a half-forgotten guise, the film noir detective, then he is accompanied by another film noir character type,

the femme fatale. Natalie shifts between the two female character types found in film noir, alternating between the "good woman" and the femme fatale, from one segment to the next. Her first appearance in the film shows her with bruises and as a wounded supporter of Leonard's cause. "We're both survivors" are her departing words to him. Yet this instantly changes about midway through the film when she verbally attacks him, goading him to hit her, so that she can force him to get rid of Dodd/Callum Keith Rennie. This instant shift from passivity ("acting" as a victim) to aggression (using Leonard as her pawn) is at once a shocking rupture in any sympathy extended to her as it is a strengthening of the connection to Leonard by presenting him as further victimized (a victimization that he is unaware of). Yet this revised view of Natalie becomes once again revised as the events of the death/disappearance/murder of her boyfriend Jimmy/Larry Holden unfold. In this constant revision, not only of Natalie but also of Teddy and of course Leonard, the stereotypes of film noir are erected and dismantled, left standing but as signifiers that

problematic identity rather than assure it. Natalie's constant personality shifts are only perceived as such based on the memory-induced episodic nature of the film. And even then, she escapes being stereotyped through an explanation of motivation; her aggression and deception are not empty maliciousness but motivated, as the film reveals, through Leonard's own actions. When she "uses" Leonard, it becomes clear it is to protect herself from problems he has created for her (and also enacting her own measure of vengeance against him for Jimmy's death), not simply her taking advantage of his "condition." Character types serve another function in *Memento*. Natalie as femme fatale or Teddy as deceptive and dirty cop function to heighten the film's subjectivity, privileging Leonard. As such, the presentation of characters as generic types heightens the film as a product of Leonard's memory. The "character types" in *Memento* are presented more as recollected generalities than detailed character portraits—a result of Leonard's interaction with those around him. If criticism is laid against *Memento* for its insistence and reliance upon character type, I believe it is toward a thematic end. Types are another way in which Leonard's subjectivity encroaches on the film world. Not only in the narrative structure of fragmentation, but also the characterization adds to this coherence of identity. But the coherence of Leonard's subjectivity that the film constructs, and that the audience accepts, becomes radically challenged.

**"THE FACTS: FACT 1. MALE, FACT 2. WHITE; FACT 3.**

**FIRST NAME: JOHN OR JAMES; FACT 4. LAST NAME:**

**G\_\_\_\_; FACT 5. DRUG DEALER; FACT 6. CAR LICENSE**

**NUMBER: SG13 7IU"**

Leonard's world, the case he is trying to solve and the life he wishes to return and atone for, is guided by these six facts. Yet his reliance on this information, correlating 'facts' with 'truth,' makes him susceptible to the manipulation of others as well as himself. Responding to Teddy's claim that his facts/ his notes might be "unreliable," Leonard explains that "Memory's unreliable. No really. Memory's not perfect. It's not even that good. ...Memories can be changed or distorted and they're irrelevant if you have the facts." His unwavering commitment to the authenticity of his mementoes prevents him from considering their contrivance as disingenuous or harmful to him and his quest. The viewer becomes aware of this construction in key scenes where Leonard reacts to Teddy's advice: disregarding Teddy's suggestion to not trust Natalie—a suggestion he hesitantly accepts until reading the caption of Teddy's photo ("Don't Believe His Lies"); when wishing to forget and disbelieve Teddy's shocking revelation about the real John G., Leonard maliciously adds the harmful description to Teddy's photo, knowing the ultimate outcome of this action (at least for the moment). This latter action is the point at which the narrative reorients itself and audience identification and the film's events are completely restructured (This event will be addressed in greater detail shortly). The viewer is also influenced, less consciously, by Leonard's inscriptions—his memory becomes the viewer's reality and as the film progresses they both bend. Christopher Nolan, the

director, has affirmed this relation.<sup>3</sup> But Leonard is aware of the inadequacies of his method of reconstruction and the futility of his search. "She's gone and the present is trivia, which I can scribble down as notes." His loss, that he feels anew every time his memory lapses, forces him to try to create a static present to mirror the static image of the past he has fashioned. But the uncertainties of the present, in its duplicity and constant revision and reinterpretation, lead to equal uncertainties about the past.

**"JOHN G. RAPED AND MURDERED MY WIFE"**

Leonard is haunted by the image of his raped and murdered wife, his last "authentic" memory. This is the last thing he experienced before his head injury; these are the words he has tattooed on his chest. The tattoo, backwards (relating to Leonard's mental processes, Burt says it's "all backwards," and the film's very structure), is a constant reminder, whenever he sees himself, he sees her death and his loss and anger. He consoles himself with a thought: "We all need mirrors to remind ourselves who we are. I'm no different." John G., as the narrative reveals, is a kind of mirror for Leonard: a mirror image, the inverse of Leonard; and a double, an external embodiment of his own negative attributes. (Tellingly, Leonard's double is unseen and has no independent identity). John G. fills a role for Leonard: he is the embodiment of his motivation to live. He is the antithesis to all that is positive and progressive. The vital role that he occupies requires Leonard's persistence and determination. But this is the prescribed role given to him by Leonard. In addition to this prescribed role, the other characters adopt roles in their interactions with Leonard. Natalie adopts the roles of abused and submissive woman and as aggressive and malevolent woman ('the femme fatale') to successfully navigate within Leonard's fragmented world. Teddy conceals his identity as a police officer going undercover and even getting Leonard to address him by his childhood name Teddy, instead of his given name, John. But more damning, as has been observed, is Leonard's own adopted role. This becomes the most potent source for the entire narrative disruption when it is itself shown as a construction at the film's pensive climax. Leonard occupies the role of moral judge attempting to do his honourable duty in avenging his murdered wife. This role is not seen as such (not seen as an adopted role Leonard plays), which is why when he turns his attention to Teddy consciously knowing he is not the murderer he seeks, it unnerves all prior associations, all of which were based on Leonard's personality and motivation—now under suspicion. But the adoption or prescriptions of roles (assumed identities) extends to Leonard's memories of his wife and the attack.

**"My wife wasn't diabetic . . . She wasn't diabetic. You think I don't know my own wife?"**

Much like the way in which the viewer's stability in identifying with Leonard is shaken at the climax, his own stability is shaken by Teddy when the entire memory of his wife is instantly undermined—which includes his life and her death

<sup>3</sup> Stephens 88.

(this, of course, affects the viewer and their relation to Leonard and his history/ memory as well). With Teddy's claim that Leonard's wife was diabetic, not Sammy's wife (that Sammy unknowingly killed in Leonard's recollection of the case), Leonard has two flashes of memory: one in which he playfully pinches his wife, the other where he injects her with insulin. The attack on the certainty that Leonard thought he had causes him to react against the intrusion of his secure remembered world. Leonard's persistent claim is that he "knows who he is" and only forgets events after his injury gives him some security in knowing why he set out on the path he travels, even if he constantly loses his direction. The possibility that Leonard's wife was diabetic combined with Leonard's vision (an authentic or constructed memory?) leads to a spiral of unacknowledged possibilities, too disruptive to Leonard's sense of self, purpose, and history to accept. This is all intertwined with Leonard's story of Sammy Jankis—a story Leonard consoles himself with as a marker of his own identity (he is 'better' than Sammy because he has a "system" and "motivation"—he defines himself against Sammy). But is Sammy Leonard? With Teddy's comment not only does the entire film but Leonard's relation to the events (which he remains at the centre of) become reappraised. Up until this point Sammy Jankis was a way for Leonard to understand, and to some degree, master his own world, he saw Sammy fail, and has adopted a method to not do the same. But the question that Leonard cannot dare raise, the question that at this moment in the film ultimately presents itself, is if Sammy is a remembered amalgam of Leonard's faults, is Leonard's way of coping with his past to dismember it (as opposed to a remembering) and to reconstruct it according to a paradigm that minimizes his accountability and maximizes his motivation. This is the critical project *Memento* undertakes, simultaneous with the film's illustration of the recuperative power of remembering (through Leonard's persistent goal and the film's formal structure that has to be reintegrated through the viewers' memories) there is a movement toward dismembering. Dismembering here is used both in its literal sense, to divide up (or violently with body parts), and in a figurative sense with the separation of Leonard's memory ("dividing it up violently") causing a violent disorientation in Leonard and audience alike (As well, the lexical similarities between dismember and remember equates, through wordplay, their relation in *Memento*.) While every disorientation that occurs through Leonard's (and the audience's) awakening into each new present is resolved, the possibilities, contradictions and inadequacies that rise in Leonard's recollection of events dismember the past he thought he knew. Likewise, once Leonard decides to use himself against Teddy (who will be his next victim) the memory of Leonard and his prior filmic acts (which are temporally his future acts from this decision) is 'dismembered'—the sudden tear in identification, in Leonard's memory (was Teddy correct?), in the audience's view toward Leonard's memory and the other narrative events becomes more fragmented and irreparably damaged than Leonard's memory ever could have been. The result of this division between remembering and dismembering transforms into a question over the relative strengths (and differences) of con-

structed and authentic memory: The film negates such difference, as Teddy, in his revelation to Leonard, aptly states: "I guess I can only make you believe the things you want to be true, huh?" The way Leonard has fashioned his world and his past, a reaction to the consistent uncertainties of his present and anchor for his own identity, act more to confirm a "truth" he needs (to assert control over his world by identifying and thereby ordering it) than a "truth" that may have in fact happened (a reconstruction of events as they occurred).

The results of Leonard's persistence in maintaining a constant vision of the past (his past, his wife's past) and the directed pursuit of John G. (even if he has already completed this task) are ways to prescribe a structure to his world, building order out of chaos. This ordering attempts the creation of something static within the constantly shifting world Leonard moves within. This stasis is a constructed/ remembered fantasy world (in that it is the world of his imagination but also in that it did not exist as he recalls it) that impacts his present, orienting his course. But combined with the positive aspects of creating something to guide him (his image of the past) is the pain and anger he feels—impotent in attempting to honour his memory of his wife (it is, after all, to honour "his" memory). Leonard maintains his world of self-torture, we come to understand, even after he has killed the original, and subsequent, John G.s including Jimmy (as Teddy's selection—part of a plan to steal drug money), and Teddy himself (as a "deceptive", and therefore guilty, John G.). The need for Leonard to maintain this perfect world of pain, torment, and self-deception in the face of the answer to his puzzle and escape from it is shockingly revealed when Teddy forces him to think about his wife. The insecurity Leonard feels is quelled by his psychotic movement to eliminate Teddy according to the "factual" rules he has given himself to follow. The preservation of Leonard's mental world, which includes his "remembered" past and his motivated present, is bound in a psychotic reordering of it (killing to appease himself as much as the world into which the killing fits) presenting a sort of utopia of psychosis—what I have come to think of as a psychotopia. It is a "perfect world" wherein Leonard lives according to a principle of morally guided retribution which places him in the position of "avenging angel", spurred on by self-torment. The psychotic reordering of the world, the disavowal of certain parts of external reality to maintain an internally dictated world, is also self-sustaining for Leonard—it allows him to remain productive and not succumb to the paranoid abyss that his "condition" fosters. Rather, the internally dictated world is necessary for Leonard's productivity, so much so that the possibility of operating outside its boundaries triggers a psychotic defense. When the reliance on this structured existence (in Leonard's quest for the killer) is psychotically disturbed in his reaction against Teddy, it becomes clear that it is the world itself that is perpetuated (that he still hunts John G. for the rape and murder of his wife) at the expense of the possible truths of the external reality. Indeed, the mental world cannot accept external intrusions which attack its stability; it seems to persist only in the knowledge of itself, without distinctions between inner solitary world and another

external world. Teddy's simple statement raises the possibility of a (drastically different) world outside his own, reorienting him in his internal world. His reaction, to save his stability which is his security, is to kill Teddy (the messenger) but to do so by realigning himself into his secure pursuit of John G. This psychotopia is a mental world Leonard has created to control his environment—to create order out of chaos. It is a private space (most accessible through the black and white motel sequences, but definitely illustrated by the film's structure). His original quest long since completed, with the "proof" of Teddy's photograph of Leonard, he chooses what to remember and integrate into his worldview—choosing his "facts" to fit his world rather than letting his world be solely determined by those "facts." The exclusion of certain "facts" relates to a problem that Leonard raises with regard to Sammy: the inability to create new memories.

Leonard's story of Sammy Jankis centres on a crucial point for Leonard's insurance investigation—that Sammy could not instinctually make new memories, as he should have been able to do. Sammy's inability to make new instinctually conditioned memories causes Leonard to determine that Sammy's illness was psychological rather than physical—turning down his wife's claim. Leonard remains confident: "Conditioning didn't work for Sammy, so he became helpless. But it works for me. I live the way Sammy couldn't. Habit and routine make my life possible. Conditioning. Acting on instinct." The "conditioning" and "instinct" Leonard speaks of indicates that he can make new memories. Yet, essential to this internalized mental world, it seems that he chooses not to make new memories—or to remember that which will jar his sense of the past. One such event has been described where Leonard remembered his wife—was she diabetic? Or had Leonard forgotten or become susceptible to Teddy's "lies"? Or had Leonard remembered but conditioned himself to forget (through his reaction against Teddy)? Another event, another possible memory, occurs at the end of the film when Leonard is driving and he briefly closes his eyes. In a "flash" there is the image of Leonard in bed with his wife, both happy, while Leonard has a tattoo on his chest, over his heart: "I Did It." (The blank area over his heart was previously established by Leonard as the place for a note of the murderer's death when he's "found him.") This vision is one of the last things Leonard experiences after Teddy has provided doubts and Leonard has decided to kill him. But even after the revelations that Leonard had killed the original John G. and had potentially killed his own wife (the act he ascribed to Sammy), a point of stability rested in the "fact" that however his wife had died that set him on his quest, she was dead. Yet Leonard's vision, both a remembered past (that he chooses to forget) and an idealized past (that he would like to remember), raises more problems about the past (as he has chosen to recreate it, and as it, in moments like this, slips out). Even if his flashbacks are "true," he has decided not to adopt them (to integrate them) but instead to perpetuate a world in which his wife has been murdered by a stranger. Leonard is happy to work toward his own self-deception for that will continue his fragile (psychopathic) world.

**"Maybe I'm not finished yet. Maybe I need to be sure that you won't ever use me again. You're a John G.? Fine, then you can be my John G.. Do I lie to myself to be happy? In your case, Teddy... yes, I will."**

This point is the major shift the film undertakes. From this point the entire narrative must be revisited to re-establish Leonard's position. But more powerfully, the sense of Leonard's identity, promoted by him, becomes uprooted by this action, relating to a similar challenge to the viewers' identity (who have identified so closely with this central character)—with identification, Leonard's self-motivated action, seemingly "out of character" attacks a sense of Leonard that has been established to which the audience has attached itself. Leonard's choice to deceive himself challenges the very movement of the film which has the audience seeking to follow Leonard's trail in pursuit of the killer.

The way in which the film establishes Leonard and his cause with which the audience is encouraged to identify and then instantly ruptures this identification connects the film to another noir-inflected film, Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). My interest in briefly comparing the two is in the nature of the protagonists' actions and the rupture in identification. Both films' protagonists (characters of close identification) navigate through overt detective/ mystery plots. Their psychological disabilities hamper their effectiveness on the case. And ultimately they (with the audience) recognize a "truth" that they have previously been unaware of (although in *Vertigo*, this "truth" is experienced by the audience before the protagonist) which sends them even further into the psychological abyss that they were treading. But beyond these general similarities is the very different way the shift in identification occurs in each film. In *Vertigo*, once Scottie/James Stewart has left Judy/Kim Novak apartment she hurriedly packs and writes him a letter explaining the events of Madeleine/Kim Novak murder including her involvement as an impersonator. Over this, a flashback retraces the events of Madeleine's death, that had been previously experienced by the audience through Scottie's perspective. Judy quickly decides not to leave Scottie, who she deceived but now loves. This moment in the film powerfully realigns the previous events and extends sympathy from Scottie to Judy, the viewer now understanding her position. The events that follow this moment, where Scottie attempts to refashion Judy in Madeleine's image, take on greater power with awareness of Judy's place in the relationship. In Scottie's attempt to maintain the stability of an idealized past, with the idealized Madeleine, he strips Judy of her own identity. But the viewer is aware of Judy as a human being in this interchange, more than the fetishized object of Madeleine. In that moment when Judy writes the letter, identification with Scottie becomes ruptured. The viewer's attachment to the "facts" of the case Scottie was on become blurred as the "truth" of the events is visually recounted. With Judy's sorrowful confession, identification is torn from Scottie's exclusivity and extends to her. But *Memento*'s shift in identification is more disturbing. Where *Vertigo* ruptures close identification with Scottie by extending it to Judy, *Memento* ruptures

that identification but does not re-affix it. Once Leonard's personality and motivation have been questioned (with the viewer not identifying with this most recent turn), there is no alternate site on which to focus. *Memento* is so disturbing because it extends identification without identity. Identifying closely with a character whose identity becomes destabilized both implicates the viewer in Leonard's madness and challenges their own sense of identity, linked throughout the film with him.

Other similarities that *Vertigo* and *Memento* share include characters' deception—against the protagonist and by the protagonist against himself. In both films characters frequently adopt roles to manipulate the protagonist. This has already been established with *Memento*. Its main instance in *Vertigo* has just been mentioned with Judy's role as Madeleine, part of Gavin Elster's/Tom Helmore plan to murder his wife and use Scottie and his acrophobia as the alibi. The adopted roles, to manipulate the protagonist, are combined with prescribed roles, that the protagonist sets for others, to order his world and make himself more secure. This self-deception is integral to both films. Scottie desperately wants the image of Madeleine back and tries to trick himself into her return when he finally completes his reworking of Judy. But when he realizes that this image he wanted to be true is not, which extends past his own self-deception to his own manipulation, he reacts violently—culminating in Judy's "accidental" death. *Memento* extends the self-deception by never grounding it in an identifiable objective reality, never identifying a truth to counter the deception. What it does do is present a host of possible pasts that Leonard may have lived through but has denied for his own stability, security and deception in still hunting John G., the figure who raped and murdered his wife.

What I wish to do now, moving toward a conclusion, is to recreate one of a number of possible histories reconstructed through the mementoes the film leaves. When Leonard witnessed his wife's attack, he presumably assumed the worst, reacting with deadly force. When he ran to see if she was still alive he was attacked, and the head injury caused his anterograde amnesia. But several times through the film the image of his wife's blinking eye, shrouded in a shower curtain used in the attack, leads to the possibility that she was not killed during the attack—it was only Leonard's memory of the presumed death. If his wife survived the attack, piecing together another image from Leonard's fragmented mind, his vision of rejoicing her with the "I Did It" tattoo may have been more a reality than a fantasy. If after killing John G., as Teddy documented with a Polaroid, he returned to his wife (with the new tattoo) his quest would have been completed, but his memory disorder would remain. (The tattoo would have been removed, to maintain his internalized world and the atonement for his wife's death, much like the tattoo of Teddy's license plate will be removed.) The act of killing the original John G. was immensely therapeutic for Leonard. Teddy said that he "wanted to see that [happy] face again." Then, if Teddy's words and Leonard's flashback are in any way correct, the story of the death of Sammy's wife can be seen as a revised description of the actual death of Leonard's wife—accomplished at Leonard's hands. The murder of his own wife (through insulin overdose)

transferred back into this compulsion to find John G. (again). Leonard's memory disorder aided repression of his involvement in her death, enabling Leonard's compulsion to repeat both his crime and vindication—the murder (of his wife and John G.). This notion of a compulsion to repeat was first articulated by Freud in "Further Recommendations in the Technique of Psycho-analysis: Recollection, Repetition and Working Through" (1914), where he wrote that "here the patient remembers nothing of what is forgotten and repressed, but that he expresses it in action. He reproduces it not in his memory but in his behaviour; he repeats it, without of course knowing that he is repeating it."<sup>4</sup> Leonard's act, the pursuit and murder of John G., becomes part of an elaborate process of repeating his past murder of his wife but reconstructed as the outlet for his rage—unable to be directed at himself. This compulsion becomes psychotic when after recognizing his own failure in killing the wrong man he decides to kill another man (innocent of the crime) instead of warning himself of his mistake (and the possible truth).

**"I have to believe in the world outside my own mind. I still have to believe that my actions still have meaning, even if I can't remember them. I have to believe that when my eyes are closed, the world's still there. But do I? Do I believe the world's still there? Is it still out there?! ...Yes."**

Did Leonard discover his wife dead at the hands of John G.? Did his wife survive the attack? Did he kill (the original) John G.? Did he return to his (alive) wife after killing John G., triumphant? Did Leonard kill his wife? Or did she manipulate him into killing her (as Sammy's wife did)? If the answer to one of these questions is "yes," then it is "yes" for them all. For a film that surrounds itself in uncertainties and doubt, every doubt (or even "certainty", where they tenuously exist) must be afforded equal measure. And since Leonard's memory (more his "certain" past with his wife than his present day-to-day existence) cannot ultimately satisfy or trust itself, all possibilities must be accorded equal weight. Everything and nothing exist simultaneously.

What I have attempted here is just an initial investigation into the dynamics at work in *Memento*. This analysis is only one of many that the film allows. Above all, *Memento* is a film of possibilities.

**"Now... where was I?"**

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Further Recommendations in the Technique of Psycho-analysis: Recollection, Repetition and Working Through," *Collected Papers*, trans. Joan Rivière, vol. 2 (London: Hogarth, 1933), 369.

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# FLOWERS OF SHANGHAI

*Flowers of Shanghai* has been widely acclaimed as Hou Hsiao-Hsien's masterpiece to date; it appeared in the majority of critics' lists of the "Ten Best Films of the '90s", frequently in top place; along with Hou's other dozen-or-so films, it has yet to be given a theatrical release in North America. Hou is widely regarded as the most important living filmmaker, but his films have been accessible only to those attending film festivals or in the retrospective of ten films that toured North America in recent years: accessible, that is, only to those living in a very few major cities. The big corporations that now dominate and effectively control our wider film culture are headed by tycoons who have evidently no interest in cinema but a great deal of interest in making more and more money. There are signs that some of them are now wondering whether Asian and Iranian films just *might* bring in enough customers to be worth bothering with.

Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us*, Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* and Edward Yang's *Yi Yi* have opened in Toronto and (to judge from their longish runs) appear to have had a limited success—sufficient, in fact, in the case of *Yi Yi* for an enterprising management to try out the film in a complex well outside the city centre. It

by **Robin Wood**



seems not impossible that further (and wider) releases may follow.

The situation is little better on video and DVD, distribution again being controlled, by and large, by the major corporations who also control the Hollywood studios: Why waste money on the rights when for every hundred who might be expected to buy a DVD of *Pearl Harbour*, only two would spend their money on *Flowers of Shanghai*?<sup>1</sup> It is, however, worth alerting readers to the partial (and only with effort accessible) availability of some of the major Asian films in cities that have extensive Chinatowns. In Asian video stores in Toronto I have managed to collect all the films to date (including *In the Mood for Love*) of Wong Kar-wai on excellent DVDs, complete with English subtitles. Unfortunately such stores appear dominated by Hong Kong companies, so Taiwanese films are not usually available, but *Flowers of Shanghai* is the exception. The DVD is of high quality, with Dolby sound, though the subtitles in this case are somewhat problematic, intermittently illegible when the bottom of the screen is brightly lit. The opening scene (an eight-minute take) suffers most, almost all the remainder of the film being set in rooms lit only by table lamps at some distance from the camera. I heard a rumour about a year ago that an enterprising American firm had acquired the rights to six of the films in the Hou travelling retrospective, but this has never been confirmed and so far nothing has come of it. One can always hope. Meanwhile, the pre-*Yi Yi* works of Yang and almost the entire output of Tsai Ming-Liang (*Vive l'Amour* is available on DVD, presumably on the strength of its title!) await proper distribution; the latter's other three films to date are all available on videos of less than first-rate (though serviceable) quality, in certain of those "alternative" video stores found in big cities. I have not been able to find any of Yang's earlier films anywhere in any format, though *Yi Yi* is now available on DVD in the States and is to be released in Canada in the fall.

I should add that, in the event of some distributor deciding to try Hou out on the general public, I don't think *Flowers of Shanghai* would be the wisest first choice: It is a very difficult and demanding movie, the basic difficulty for Western audiences in identifying characters played by unfamiliar actors who all have dark hair, are clean-shaven, and roughly the same height, compounded by the film's extreme subtlety, its complex, elliptical and continuously shifting narrative, and its director's intransigent refusal to "help" the audience by making obvious points, spelling out meanings, telling us what to think of the characters, or carefully explaining their motivation (which is never simple and perhaps not always explicable in clumsy words). Were I an entrepreneur, I think I would start with *Daughter of the Nile*, perhaps because it was the first Hou film I saw and I was immediately an admirer. Let's face it, all Hou's later films are difficult, and so are Wong Kar-wai's (can anyone confidently assert that s/he has fully understood *In the Mood for Love* on one viewing, even on the level of the narrative? I've now watched it three times and I'm still learning). If we are to experience these films, we have first to unlearn the indoctrinations of contemporary Hollywood and become active observers rather than passive receptacles, noticing even

the smallest details, pondering their significance, making thematic connections beyond those of narrative, reaching our own decisions rather than having them foisted on us. These films are not bags of popcorn to swallow, digest, expel and forget, but works to live with for the rest of our lives.

### **The place of the film in Hou's career so far**

Prior to *Flowers of Shanghai*, Hou's films divided roughly into two periods, the division marked by a film that belonged to neither: a group of early films (the earliest seem not to have been shown in the West) apparently drawing on elements of autobiography, with mainly rural settings, relatively accessible (*Summer at Grandpa's* has had a limited circulation); an increasingly complex and demanding trilogy of films about the social/political history of Taiwan in the twentieth century (*City of Sadness*, *The Puppet Master*, *Good Men, Good Women*), the sociopolitical analysis approached obliquely via the experiences of fictional characters. The "marker" separating the groups was *Daughter of the Nile*, Hou's first film set entirely in contemporary Taipei (to which characters in earlier films sometimes travelled), about young people involved directly or indirectly in criminal activity. The trilogy was followed by *Goodbye South, Goodbye*, a contemporary crime film, at once violent and ironic, about inept gangsters. As another "marker" however, it seems to have introduced a new heterogeneity. *Flowers of Shanghai* is a period film standing apart from all its predecessors by being set and shot in Shanghai, and it has been followed by *Millennium Mambo*, shown at this year's Cannes festival and the first of Hou's mature films to receive a less than enthusiastic reception, dismissed by critics in a perfunctory line or two with no attempt to relate it to Hou's previous work. (One wonders, and suspends judgement: new developments in an artist's career have so frequently been misread or read as "failures", when subsequently they prove to be merely different). *Flowers* also stands apart in its subject-matter and in the extremity of its formal rigour.

### **Overall View**

There is not a single exterior in the entire film, set entirely within the upclass brothels (known as "flowerhouses") of Shanghai in the late 19th century, all the prostitutes (or 'flower girls') deprived of their real names and rechristened after colours ("Crimson"), flowers ("Jasmin") or precious or semi-precious stones ("Pearl", "Jade", "Emerald"). With a single exception, we never learn their real names, and though they occasionally go outside their flowerhouses we are never shown it. This alone establishes the film's claustrophobic atmosphere, which we are to share throughout, identifying us (if with anyone) with the women, whose behaviour we shall probably find sometimes alienating. (The men can come and go at will and have some kind of external existence; the women go out, if at all, only with their clients).

The deprivation of exteriors is intensified by the deprivation of lighting: Only the "punctuation" scenes of the (to westerners) somewhat mysterious game (dominated entirely by men), which also takes place in the brothels, are (relatively—the surrounding darkness is still palpably present, and again

there are only table-lamps) brightly lit. The spectator's sense of claustrophobia is further intensified by the cluttered decor throughout the film (the characters who move around—mainly the women—having continuously to circumvent the furniture) and the use of dark panels and doorways. We get the sense of a kind of comfortable, well-upholstered, hell.

One might suggest that Hou expresses his own identification with the women by imposing upon himself a parallel deprivation, formal and stylistic: no cuts within scenes; a mere 37 shots, invariably separated by fades to black, in a film lasting around 110 minutes; no close-ups, no point-of-view shots, the stance throughout being that of the objective spectator, following the action with his/her gaze. The camera movements are more functional than decorative and are not necessarily connected to the movements of characters, any Ophulsian indulgence in grace or elegance is eschewed, yet the movements are never so abrupt or rough as to take on an autonomous expressivity. Though I can think offhand of no film that conveys a deeper, more disturbing sense of tragic waste, we are likely to remain completely dry-eyed throughout. Identification with the characters is prohibited by the formal/stylistic decisions; the film engages us on some level below that of tears, ending in total desolation (however one reads the final scene!). Nor should this be taken to imply that the characters are treated unsympathetically—quite the contrary. The moral discriminations among the characters, the varying degrees of sympathy we extend to them, are I think clear enough, but our judgements and our sympathies are elicited purely by the characters' behaviour, not by any directorial nudges, emotive music, privileged close-ups, special lighting, etc. Once he has established his rules, Hou never intrudes. I know of no other film quite like it.

The claustrophobic image the film overall presents, of a world within which the inhabitants cling on to an illusory view of freedom and self-definition, seems to me to correspond, very disturbingly, to our own world, in which we are entrapped by the corporations (also essentially male-controlled) just as the women of the film are by a male-dominated culture. One might say that, even before male domination has felt compelled to surrender, even under formidable, indeed incontrovertible, challenge, it has installed itself as inevitable and unchallengeable in its institutions and its ability to reform itself, Proteus-like, in ever more grotesque and monstrous configurations. Our world, now apparently under the total control of capitalism and the United States of America, has launched itself, sweeping aside all protest, on a masculinist death-roll. Freud's great error, it seems to me, in (with ever-increasing credibility) presupposing a "universal" deathwish, was to fail to identify it as masculine. Men (as embodied in the corporations), it seems, with their power, their technology, their monstrous and increasingly massive and grotesque phallus, having given serious consideration to going out with a very big bang indeed (nuclear power), are settling for a slow ejaculation (the increasing devastation of the environment, global warming, the depletion of the ozone layer, etc.). One must (I suppose) hope that at least some of these guys get satisfaction from it. Jesus said that the meek will inherit the earth.



Jade/Bang Shuan and  
Wang/Tony Leung Chiu-wai

They won't: there will be no earth left to inherit. Perhaps (one hopes) a few living organisms may survive, most probably cockroaches. Perhaps they will evolve, over the millennia, into something more constructive.

The phrase "patriarchal capitalism" has become (necessarily) so common as to risk losing its force, even its meaning, which is quite precise: Some readers will respond "Oh, not again!"; for others it will be a standard, automatic expression, its force dissipated by overfamiliarity. It is important, then (with Hou's film always in mind), to attempt to revive that force by insisting upon the implications of each word. "Patriarchal": In a world dominated and controlled by men who have made and continue to enforce its laws, women can gain power, and a certain limited and ambiguous control over their destinies (in, for example, politics, business or the educational system), only by submitting to those laws, working within instead of against them, fixing themselves in the masculine position. The Women's Movement of the 60s/70s, for all its inspirational energy, has not changed this situation essentially, the dominant ideology having made some show of compromise, allowing more women (like the "Aunties" of *Flowers of Shanghai*) into positions of power within the system so long as they continue to obey its basic laws. Women's other means of access to power has always been their sexuality, the film's "flower houses" neatly embodying this by offering sex as com-

1 Since this was written, Winstar has released its own DVD of *Flowers of Shanghai*—hopefully the first in a series of Hou's films. In contrast to the Asian release, the subtitles are perfectly legible and the image is slightly wider.

mmodity for the acquisition of wealth. The flowerhouse "Aunties" (we would call them "Madams"), and to a lesser degree the "flower girls" themselves, gain a certain degree of control in the patriarchal capitalist world by amassing the money the men spend (but they also have to spend much of it on "looking beautiful" and, indeed, on looking expensive, so that the men feel they're getting their money's worth), the irony being that this power is entirely dependent upon men and the male control of wealth in the larger world outside, and is wielded entirely in men's service. "Capitalism": Power equals money, the acquisition of wealth for its own sake becomes the ultimate, overriding pursuit; without wealth there is no power. Hence capitalism's basis in perpetual *competition* (whereas any sane, decent culture would base itself upon *cooperation* and mutual help); a world of continuous oneupmanship, of dog-eat-dog, in which essential human impulse is corrupted at its root. No one can survive within a capitalist culture without a degree of contamination (which is why *Flowers of Shanghai* can have no fully sympathetic, wholly admirable character), which will of course vary enormously according to the evolution of consciousness. For many, from richest to poorest, from tycoon to street beggar, transcending all classes, the capitalist ethos has become completely naturalized, the competitive impulse (inscribed as instinct) automatic.

#### A Note on Structure

The film's 37 shots (not counting the credits) do not exactly correspond to its scenes (defining "scene" as a more-or-less continuous action). All scenes are separated by fades to black, accompanied by the haunting theme music of Yoshiro Hanno, but a few such fades (with different or no music) indicate brief time lapses *within* scenes. There is only one exception, where two fades are used with no indication of time lapse, privileging a 'key' moment to which I shall return.

#### The Opening Shot

Everything is there already, in this amazing eight-minute take (the longest in the film): the rest of the film in embryo, or the egg that the remainder will hatch. Five characters (all male) will be singled out, in widely contrasting ways, representing widely contrasting positions; four will be prominent in the narrative, the fifth is present as a representative figure.

The group is clustered around a table, with food and drink within reach, playing a game (repetitions of which will punctuate the film, establishing it as iconic) not fully comprehensible to outsiders but clearly, like most of our games, built upon the principle of oneupmanship, the triumph of 'beating' someone (even our games and sports encourage competition, not cooperation, which is encouraged only in a very few sports such as mountain-climbing). The players are all male, women being excluded from its masculine mystique, allowed to be present only as spectators or servers (literally "waitresses at the banquet of life!"); the men sit, the women stand. The penalty for losing is to drink, so that the weaker players become increasingly incapable of concentration and alertness as the game proceeds.

The four men who will figure in the film's various narrative



Pearl/Carina Lau with 2 customers

lines (all concerning their relationships with "flower girls") are seated at or near the head of the table, not quite symmetrical. The camera, though constantly mobile (there are many reframings) hovers around the far end, so that the most important characters remain in (variable) longshot. The fifth significant figure, of no subsequent dramatic importance, is the one to whom we are brought closest, near the camera screen left; he "speaks" the characteristic cynicism of the social milieu, establishing it at the outset, maliciously ridiculing a couple who, against the unwritten rules, appear to have fallen seriously in love and become inseparable. Of the other four, the



elderly Master Hong, the father-figure, is introduced controlling and organizing the game, just as he will later preside over various subsequent transactions (all involving money) among the "flowers", their "Aunties" and their customers. (We gradually discover that extended relationships—a few months or so—are not uncommon, and even marriage is not unknown, although the "flower" is most unlikely to be "first wife", but all of these are characterized by money transactions and a sense of convenience. Some of the later conversation during the game revolves around the question of whether a "flower" with a semi-permanent partner can legitimately go with other men

while her main client continues to visit her, an unresolved issue that will become crucial in the development of the film's central relationship). In contrast to the eldest, the youngest (here called by the familiar "Yufu", establishing his junior status, subsequently young Master Zhu) is a new initiate, innocent, fresh, unspoiled, but eager to learn the ways of his experienced seniors, losing every round of the game when he enters it but reacting with good humour, delighted to be entering the world of real men. A young woman beside him (from genuine concern?—because she wants to ingratiate herself with a prospective "caller"?—the ambiguity is central to the film's

thematic) prevents him from drinking too much. The least emphasized (he plays the smallest part in the subsequent developments) is Master Luo, placed somewhat lower down the table, camera left.

Then, finally, above Luo at the head, there is Master Wang, who stands out for three reasons: because he doesn't speak a single word throughout or join in the game or the laughter; because he withdraws, still silent, about three-quarters through the shot; and because he is Tony Leung Chiu-wai who, if we have any extensive familiarity with Asian cinema, we shall identify as readily as we would Cary Grant or John Wayne, despite the fact that, unlike Grant or Wayne, his persona differs drastically from film to film, from his young policeman in *Chungking Express* to his repressed businessman in *In the Mood for Love*, or from his idealistic young mute in *City of Sadness* to his weary and disillusioned gay lover in *Happy Together*. The lighting of the first fade-in ensures that Leung's is the first face we make out clearly. He is clearly one of the screen's great actors, his expressive face here establishing a complex character without resort to dialogue and whilst he remains an apparently insignificant member of an ensemble, never singled out by close-up. Wang is onlooker rather than participant (not just in the game but in the ethos); unlike all the others he appears troubled, preoccupied, withdrawn, even while a vague smile (automatic response) hovers on his lips to establish his membership of the milieu; he clearly disapproves of the pervasive cynicism, the callous attitudes to the "flower girls"; his sadness and disturbance seem both personal (confirmed when he leaves the room and the shot and we learn from the conversation that he is involved in a difficult and complex triangular relationship) and more-than-personal, a response to the society in which he is trapped. If Wang emerges as the film's conscience, it is an impotent conscience: He cannot change anything, and is unable even to resolve his personal problems in any decisive or satisfactory way. What distinguishes him is precisely his *awareness*, and we might recall that the French "*conscience*" combines the two meanings in one.

The sort of concentration Hou demands is abundantly clear from this opening scene. The primary focus of attention almost throughout appears to be the game, yet it soon becomes obvious that who wins or loses is of no real consequence and neither are the rules (I have yet to find a Westerner who understands them). What we are shown is merely a facade that we are invited to penetrate, in order to understand the *real* rules, the rules of the culture (which, I have already suggested, can be taken as embryonic of patriarchal capitalism in microcosm). The shot ends, however, after Wang's withdrawal, by offering us some important plot information: We learn from the ensuing conversation that Wang is involved with Crimson but has been "calling on" Jasmin, and today Crimson got her maids to beat Jasmin.

### The Three Relationships

Central to the film's complex structure are the shifts among (comparisons among) the three male/female relationships in which Zhu, Wang and Luo are involved (with, respectively, Jade, Crimson and Emerald) which we are implicitly invited to

Emerald/ Michelle Reis  
and Luo/Jack Gao



compare, each representing a stage in the progress from innocence to corruption (the terms to be understood in relation to the definition of patriarchal capitalism above). The Wang/Crimson relationship is clearly the film's emotional centre, and I shall reserve it for separate consideration, looking first at the progress's extremes, its beginning and end.

**Zhu/Jade.** From his introduction the initiate, young Zhu, is the film's most obviously likable character, attractive in his exuberance, his wide-eyed excitement; similarly Jade (not quite an "initiate" in the world of the flowerhouses, but a relative newcomer, demonstrably torn between impulses of rebellion and a desire to accept without question the advice of her more experienced superior, Pearl) is the most obviously appealing of the film's flower girls (though not the one who engages the deepest emotions). We are not allowed to witness their meeting, their mutual attraction, the scene of their engage-



ment and suicide pact in the event of the frustration of their desires, so we can never be entirely sure of the degree of authentic commitment on either side—only that they are young, retain a certain (not quite calculable) degree of idealism, alongside a preconditioned readiness to be accepted in the world their elders already inhabit. That the commitment was, at most, precarious becomes clear from later developments, where their reactions appear as ambiguous to them as they are to the spectator. Zhu has had a 'respectable' marriage arranged for him; Jade has prepared twin cups of poison for them to drink. Is she trying to force him, certain he will refuse the poison? Does she really mean to go through with the pact? When he dutifully, calmly repeats their promises, has he realized he never really meant them? The balancing act Hou performs here seems to me quite extraordinary: I am forced to recall the many times in my life, the many decisions, the many state-

ments and promises, when, in recollection, I have no idea of the degree of my sincerity, and I doubt whether I am unique in this. I have never seen this realized on film before, as much by elisions as by what is shown. And the moment when she forces him to drink, and drinks herself: Does she know, in her heart, that they will be saved? Does she really intend to die, and that he should die too? Our sense of the confusion of impulse is crucial: The doubt, the uncertainty, becomes the mark of the end of innocence, the transition to integration in the system.

Both seem ready to accept the necessary compromise: Zhu (who comes from a wealthy family) will contribute large sums of money to fixing Jade up with a husband. (She has vehemently rejected the offer of becoming his 'second' wife—from pride? hurt? some deep-buried insidious idea that this is what might always have been the outcome? Again we shall never know, and neither, perhaps, will she). When Jade's arranged marriage is explained to him by his experienced elders, Zhu continues to ask, repeatedly, getting no answer, But whom will she marry? It's another extraordinary moment: Even as he acquiesces in her fate, he still cares about her, the concern the last surviving remnant of his innocence.

**Luo/Emerald.** If Jade represents the beginning of the process of integration, Emerald is its end product, the film's depiction of a woman's 'success' story, a flower girl who has achieved such power that she is able to buy her freedom. At certain points in the film, during casual conversation, we are given some information about the formation of the 'flower girl', bought at the age of seven or eight and trained for the life of more-or-less genteel prostitution through childhood and adolescence (when do parents in our own twentieth century culture begin preparing their daughters, perhaps quite unconsciously, for marriage?). Emerald has achieved sufficient prestige to become, apparently, the dominant force in her "enclave", lecturing the "Auntie" on her improper and embarrassing behaviour (at her age she has no business entertaining lovers) as well as instructing her juniors. Her arrogance and self-assurance, her assumption that she is now in control, has a certain pathos in relation to her actual position. Her "freedom" can be purchased, in the event, only with the financial assistance of a hardened man who is clearly purchasing a share in her future. Luo is her perfect counterpart, a man beyond the juvenilia of 'love' for whom a relationship is purely a business transaction; he is the man of whom we know the least, because there is little left to know. Hou's subtlety (and his full awareness of what he is doing) is nicely exemplified by the fact that Emerald is the only flower girl whose "real" name we are allowed to discover, revealed at the precise moment when she has bought her freedom and her contract is officially void: She is "Miss Zhang".

**Wang/Crimson.** The continuously unstable and shifting relationship between Wang and Crimson (the Japanese Michiko Hada, a wonderfully expressive performance despite the fact that she had to be dubbed) is given the most screen time, receives the fullest development, and clearly represents the film's emotional core. They are depicted as sensitive and troubled people caught at a kind of midpoint between the innocence of Zhu/Jade and the corruption of Luo/Emerald,

already impure (money is a constant source of friction and disturbance) yet struggling to believe in each other and give expression to feelings that, while clearly fragile and precarious, strike us as authentic. The film's most pervasive motif is consumption (of food, of drink, of opium): There is scarcely a scene from which some form of consumption is absent, as if the whole fabric of the culture would disintegrate were it not for such tokens of social intercourse and comfort. With Wang it is opium. He is associated with the opium pipe from quite early on, and his later scenes are marked by the preparation and smoking of the sedative that dulls his emotions and perceptions.

The fragility of the relationship is evident from the opening shot, before we have seen them together, the question from the outset being of Crimson's fidelity and Wang's expectations of her. "Flower girl" is somewhat more than a euphemism for 'prostitute' (as we have seen, a flower girl can be involved in an affair with, and even marry, a client, unusual for a prostitute in the West unless she is played by Julia Roberts), but the film suggests that a flower girl's rights are not clearly defined. After all, she is in the business to make money. Wang seems to understand this, but is still deeply troubled by Crimson's alleged infidelity. The allegation seems about 90% confirmed later, but the 10% of uncertainty remains; the crux is, in any case, not so much Crimson's rights as Wang's. Has he, as her "official" client, the right to deny her the right to others? Their first scene together immediately raises money as the basic issue: Wang has paid her debts, why would she need other clients? But with Crimson it seems a matter of pride. She has a position, a reputation, an "image" to keep up, she must buy or be bought new jewels, new luxuries, and besides, she has to support her family. The film is very strong on the inextricable tangle of conflicting impulses, of needs real and assumed, in the human psyche. In Wang too. He appears not to care particularly for Jasmin (we see them together in a subsequent scene, marked by her handing him his pipe and a discussion of whether opium is addictive), he expresses in her company nothing of the depth of feeling (however ambivalent) of the scenes with Crimson, we sense that his recourse to Jasmin is a mere petty tit-for-tat, one infidelity answered by another. He seems totally unable to empathize with Crimson's situation, yet can we entirely blame him when the situation itself is so morally compromised?

The scene with Jasmin (the only scene in which she appears) is carried by Wang's voice-over into the ensuing scene with Crimson, which opens with a "still life" of a hairpin lying on a table. His voice-over (he is still speaking to Jasmin in the previous scene) quotes Crimson even as we see her: "Now that we have met I need no other caller". She can marry him if he pays her debts, "So I paid them, and she said her parents don't approve of the match". The voice-over ends there, and we concentrate on Crimson's visible sadness. But immediately the hairpin becomes another weapon in the battle for dominance (or some form of perverse self-respect?): "Frankly I don't need another, but I'm angry, so I might buy a pair to waste more of your foreign dollars". Wang: "Then take the money and buy something else. There's nothing special about these hairpins." Crimson: "Nothing special about me either, that's why they

suit me." Does Crimson believe this (she looks as if she does)? Is another level of her motivation a sense of inadequacy (of "not being special"), which drives her to her financial demands? (At this point a "Jade" scene is inserted—she is being discussed by the more experienced people who control and form her. Young Zhu has "slipped an emerald pendant to Jade", and Hong and Pearl immediately set themselves up as matchmakers. Jade's innocence, and its imminent corruption at the hands of her elders and betters, is tellingly juxtaposed with the Wang/Crimson negotiations). When we return to Wang and Crimson they are ordering food (always an aid to negotiations) and Crimson's unhappiness is manifest. She rebukes Wang for his insensitivity (justly? unjustly?) and ends the scene (immediately before they embrace) somewhat ominously with "I have something to discuss with you". Fade out/fade in; food arrives, the embrace is broken off, Wang serves Crimson, who smiles. The next "game" scene follows, Crimson is with Wang, Jade is with Zhu (always as spectators, never participants). Zhu loses repeatedly, drinks (as the rules insist) after every loss, Jade making no attempt to prevent him (unlike the anonymous young woman in the opening scene). He is no longer happy when he loses, no longer laughs at his ineptitude. Musical terms come to mind here: counterpoint, obviously (the different stages of involvement in the culture, Wang/Crimson, Zhu/Jade), but also fugue, the continuous development of a theme by several "voices": Wang/Crimson, Zhu/Jade, Luo/Emerald). The film's organization has many affinities with music, rather than with literature. That is one of the reasons why it is so hard to analyse meaningfully. How do you analyse a late Beethoven quartet in ways that go beyond the mere skill of composition?

We next see Wang at another of the punctuating games, again seated next to Luo; he is now participating, for the first and last time in the film. There is a disturbance outside, never clearly explained (the police rounding up people gambling in the alley?—for you mustn't gamble in public, only in the privileged houses; an accident?). Most dash out to see, Wang is left isolated, fanning himself, drinking, deeply disturbed, beyond any interest in what is going on around him.

There follows the scene of the film's "privileged" moment, referred to above, the one place where fades to black do *not* indicate a time-lapse. Wang rushes into the room we have seen him share with Crimson (her apartment?—does she live in the flowerhouse?—the domestic arrangements within flowerhouses are not entirely clear to me, but it is the place where she entertains her clients). He has a look of desperation, collapses briefly on the sofa. The "Auntie" comes in to clear up, and just before she leaves notices a man's red hat on the table. She removes it quickly, surreptitiously, and leaves. Wang gets up, staggers out, returns. Fade to black, fade in at floor level: beneath the table are a man's clothes and slippers. Wang stoops, picks up the clothing. Fade to black. Wang goes berserk, rushes around the room smashing things. It is the film's only moment of physical (as opposed to emotional or psychological) violence, the moment when the manifold tensions within the culture at last erupt, exploding the habitual decorum, the "good manners" of a hideously repressive milieu that con-

structs its surface order upon the constant serving of food and drink, the recourse to opium ready at any moment when needed to quieten any rebellious human feeling. It's as if Wang wanted to smash his whole world, and the nearest the film allows to a moment of liberation, though impotent and uselessly destructive.

The point is that the Wang/Crimson relationship is potentially the most promising depicted in the film, hence the poignance of the impossibility of its fulfilment. What makes that fulfilment impossible is, first, a kind of semi-corrupted romanticism (Wang would want Crimson to offer herself unconditionally, she would want him to gallantly pay off all her debts, support her family, as an expression of total commitment). It is their mutual commitment to money values (in other words, the romanticism is conditioned by practicality, by the values indoctrinated by the culture) that demands a compromise which romanticism renders unthinkable.

The aftermath is set out for us in a series of scenes broken by shifts to the Emerald and Jade narratives, the three threads paralleling "different kinds of failure": 1. Hong offers his patriarchal advice while Wang drinks ("It's right that you marry Jasmin now", but Wang has "obligations to Crimson" because he was her "only caller"). Wang's long silent sceptical look is eloquent; he passes from drink to opium. Crimson's bills are the crux. 2. Hong and Wang with Crimson—the men discuss the situation in front of her as if she wasn't there. 3. Wang/Crimson. Wang lies on the sofa, smoking, he and Crimson both silent; in the foreground of the image the servant woman clears the table. Crimson speaks her dominant concern with quiet sarcasm ("Am I prosperous?..."), then shifts to self-regarding melodrama ("If you abandon me my only option will be death") which may contain its quota of sincerity. Wang remains silent until the fade, smoking. It is (arguably!) the last time we see them together.

We do, however, see Wang and Hong once more in Crimson's apartment. The servant is serving tea but notices that Wang's pipe requires fresh opium: "This will take away the bitter taste"—the throwaway line sums up the role of opium in Wang's life. Wang has been promoted, he is leaving for Guangdong; Crimson has left, moved to a smaller house, a step or two down the flower girl ladder, her mother "the only one who is attending her now. Is that true?" Wang speaks his last line in the film, which effectively sums him up: "I don't know." The servant hands him his fresh pipe.

The film's final scene follows directly from young Zhu's last appearance, his repeated question as to whom Jade is to marry. It has become something of a crux, much debated. Crimson is on a bed in a dingy, ill-lit room, a man seated at the table, eating. Many (including myself) have assumed that it is Wang (he is wearing an identical black hat, or skull-cap, but so do other men in the film) and that he has either come on a last visit before his departure or has changed his mind and is back with Crimson. (Even if the latter is the case no one would mistake this for a "happy ending"—both look thoroughly defeated, as if they have simply given up, resigning themselves to a relationship that cannot be broken but can never become one of mutual trust). However, Shelly Kraicer (*CineAction*'s resident

expert on matters Chinese or Taiwanese) has suggested that this is a misreading: on the small table beside Crimson's bed is a red (outdoor) hat, similar to the one the Auntie surreptitiously removed in the scene of Wang's breakdown, presumably the hat of the man Crimson was entertaining. I tend to bow to expert knowledge, and my confidence in my reading of the scene has been severely undermined. I remain uncertain as to whether the man is or is not Tony Leung. If it is, his body language is eloquent: his back, at first, toward Crimson, his seemingly reluctant rising, walking to the bed, the sense (reflected in Crimson's face) that she now "has" him, qualified by the equally strong sense that he is no longer "with" her. If, however, we take the red hat as sufficient evidence, then Wang has left and Crimson is with the anonymous customer whose presence earlier provoked Wang's breakdown. One might see the scene as a fascinating extension of the 'Kuleshov experiment': every detail, including the actors' expressions and body language, takes on a somewhat different (though equally pessimistic) meaning depending on who we think the man is. If this is indeed a (relatively) new client, he seems quite uncertain whether he really wants to be there, whether he is going to stay (his hat left on the table within easy reach, his movement towards the bed seemingly reluctant), whether he still wants any sort of commitment to a flower girl who is so obviously on the way downhill, the possession (however temporary) of a flower girl being as much a matter of prestige as sexual attraction. I would welcome a "definitive" reading (even one that suggested that Hou fully intended the spectator's uncertainty!), but I'm not sure, finally, that it matters: However one reads the scene, is it possible to imagine one more bleak and desolate?

*Flowers of Shanghai* is a film at once austere and extremely rich. We are held at such a distance from these people, yet (speaking for myself) they enter our lives, become an intimate part of us, force us at every point to look at ourselves with something far less than satisfaction. After all, are we not all condemned to live our brief lives under the umbrella of patriarchal capitalism, our finer impulses stunted from the moment of birth? And have we not the right to resent that, and to protest? As Ingrid Bergman says in *Viaggio in Italia*, after visiting the ruins of Pompeii, "Life is so short..." As far back as (at least) *Daughter of the Nile* (the watershed of his career so far), Hou's work has been fundamentally preoccupied with the sense of the terrible and unnecessary human waste of our civilization. In *Flowers of Shanghai* this preoccupation achieves its definitive statement.

A final worry: I'm afraid the above analysis, in spelling things out, may have suggested that the film is more schematic than it actually is. Its "scheme" is in fact so subtly worked that it has taken me at least six complete viewings (together with more replays of individual scenes and moments than I can count) to disentangle it from all the detail of the realization. The above account is offered humbly, as a beginning. I am convinced that *Flowers of Shanghai* is a film that will repay the kind of meticulous examination that Victor Perkins has brought, over many years, to *Letter from an Unknown Woman*.

# DVD the Shift to Film's New Modernity

by Graeme Harper

In December 2000, the Centre for Creative and Performing Arts (CCPA), a research and development centre at the University of Wales, Bangor, began a research project in local schools using a set of DVD players. Not personal-computer based DVD players, which directly invoke ideals of CD-ROM interactivity or non-linear web-surfing, but free-standing disc players, the domestic replacement for the video cassette player—in this sense at least, machines which hark back to the film reception strategies of the video cassette era.

The project involved two age groups: 7-9 year-olds and 15-16 year olds (the first group from a primary school; the second, larger group from a high school). The range of socio-economic and cultural influences was determined by the nature of those initial project schools. The primary school, being quite close to the university (with its mix of local and international students and staff), has a wide ethnic mix but a narrow class mix. The high school has a wider socio-economic range (drawing on the local community), but a narrower ethnic mix (being predominantly white and Welsh-born).

The videotape cassette, introduced into the home market in the late 1970s, revolutionised film production and distribution, not least by bringing audience choice into the domestic space. For example, as Bordwell and Thompson note in a discussion of the historical points of avant-garde genre, home video players "increased viewer demand for compilation films (particularly combat footage) and how-to documentaries (sports training, exercise tapes, language lessons)".<sup>1</sup>

But, of course, the impact of the video cassette went way beyond only genre-based effects. Indeed, it changed practices across the full film production spectrum by opening up the exchange value or what might be called "horizontally integrated" consumer potential engendered in the film-based product itself. The video, that is: not merely a way of viewing films at home but, as history panned out, a textual and cultural force in itself.

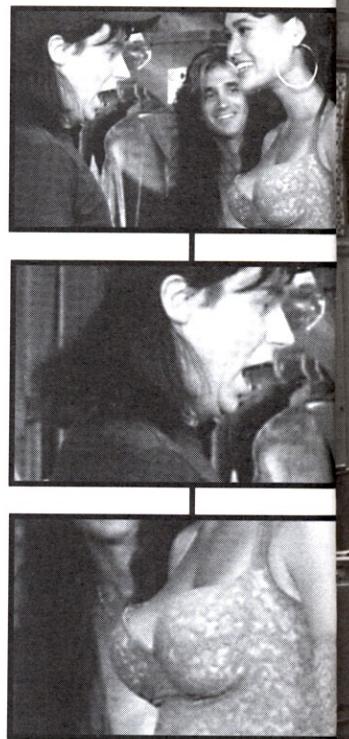
Thus the arrival of the video cassette launched the video store, the home-taping market, the fast-paced narratives now well-known in contemporary teen flicks: films designed specifically for mass domestic consumption by the primary film audiences of the post-WWII era, youth audiences brought up on television, familiar with the moving image and, most importantly of all, enthusiastically cine-literate.

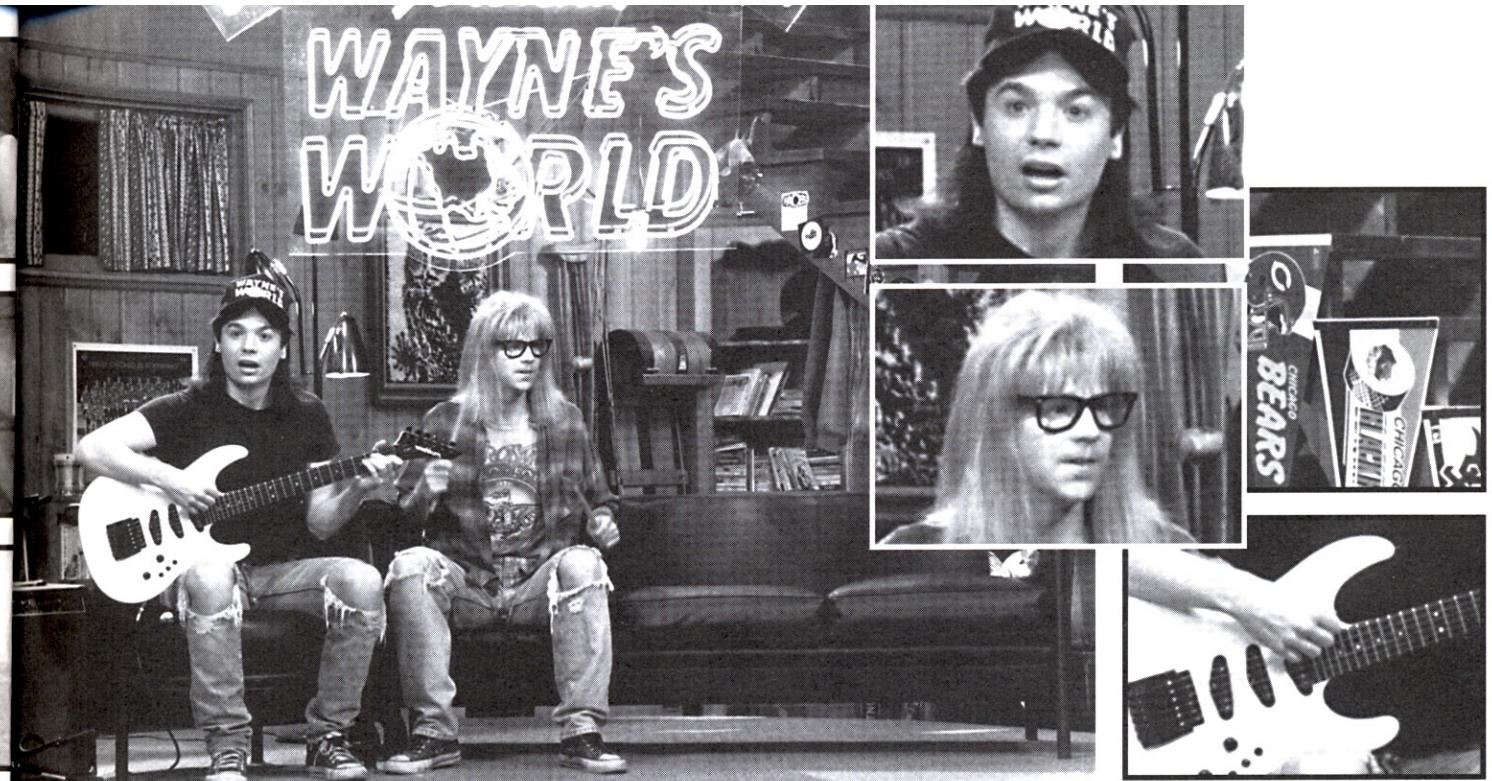
So arrived the stop-start viewing practices, the "straight-to-video" film releases, the "videotape star" (a bargain-basement version of the Hollywood film star). These launches and arrivals have now all been grounded in the historical domain of the video cassette. But what has the arrival of DVD begun to bring about?

DVD, Digital Video Disc or Digital Versatile Disc (both terms are correct), first proposed in 1994, claimed almost immediately to be the replacement not only for the video cassette but also for CD-ROM and the laserdisc. Yet there was, perhaps quite rightly, some scepticism, even as late as 1999. For example, in June of that year Edward Lawrenson wrote in *Sight and Sound* that:

Admittedly DVD looks like a reliable bet...But before the marketing people convince you that DVD's success is assured...it's instructive to recall that Betamax too was launched along can't fail lines.<sup>2</sup>

Part of this scepticism came about through the poor market penetration of the previous disc distribution medium, the laserdisc, in the Western market. Whereas in Japan the laserdisc did quite well, in the UK, for example, disc sales were remarkably poor. But this was not the only reason for early scepticism about the DVD. The second component of that scepticism seems fundamentally located in the nature of "film story"<sup>3</sup> itself—at least film story as it was understood up to the era of the video cassette—and in audience reactions to the





structure and context of that story. Context, of course, slipping into the other side of narrative, not story but discourse, not only what is told but how it is told, how it is presented to its audience.

Back in the late 1970s, the video cassette set itself up as the ultimate "personal choice" medium, an alternative to the broadcast medium of television which, while suggesting choice, has always aimed at mass choice, not a personal one. Thus the "quaint" cultural role of public access television, which endeavours to "personalise" and locally appropriate the medium (an appropriation so well satirised in the 1992 Mike Myers film vehicle *Wayne's World*). Thus, also, the failure of television to present itself as a contributory medium. Television production remains strangely remote from its consumers, bound in practices and in a self-promotional system which reflect its origins as primarily an advertising medium, as well as its desire to fight against audience commitment to a less directly consumerist cine-culture. We can summarise this approach as: make it fast, make it appealing to the masses, make it sell.

A "fight against" approach, notably, because television sought to draw consumers into the home, and thus away from cinemas, in order to sell them the products that the medium was launched to promote. Thus the post-WWII suburbanisation of the West was matched with a new distribution medium, perfect for the products on which late Western Capitalism was being built. Thus, also, consumer culture in its speedy turnaround of desire and satisfaction, product, new product, newer product, demanded more and more input from mass producers—those of the creative industries (including the film industry) not least.

The post-war cliché that life was somehow "speeding up" was matched not only by the reality that, with faster communication, faster cars, faster food, it really *was*; but, also, by the medium of television which followed cultural change and

technological advancement with visual narratives of remarkably complementary pace and pitch. TV story and TV discourse were, from its origins, fundamentally linked to general cultural progress and renewal. The textual forms which evolved with it reflected this fundamental link. A "show" became not only an often elaborate production on a stage but a short visual narrative shown on TV, as bare-boned and unadorned as an eager suburbanite TV producer could manage. An "episode" became not simply a story instalment in a weekly radio drama, perhaps shared over tea or by a fireplace, but an encompassing visual spectacular in keeping with the parade-like visual spectacles of post-war progress. Narrative itself could potentially be not "story" but "situation", as most poignantly displayed in the construction of the TV "situation comedy".

How different is the leisurely paced unfolding of a comic novel or even the pithy pitch of a well-told joke to the narrative construction of the televisual situation comedy? The genre is distinct in its formulation of visually fixed characters in a close domesticated format, performing emblematic visual actions at staccato pace to the laughter of sometimes non-existent "live" audiences. Whatever the origins of this comedy (vaudeville, being the obvious one), television has created its own story, canned its laughter in neat consumerist style, and made its own mark on narrative form and shape. The promotion of "captured situation" over "evolving story time" is one of its primary impacts. This has been the discourse of television, its way of telling, and it has matched perfectly the cultural discourses of a more "episodic" Western world, bound to an increasingly consumerist ethos based on short term desire and fast gratification.

1 David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGrawHill, 1994), 691.

2 Edward Lawrenson, "The Gizmo Graveyard" *Sight and Sound* (London: BFI, June 1999), 19.

3 Film story (what is told) and discourse (how it is told) together comprise narrative.



Stuart Little

The narrative tool heightened here is notably the canonical narrative tempo, *ellipsis*, the pace-inducing form of narrative which relies on a "literate" or, in this case, cine-literate audience "filling in the gaps" between narrative points. The narrative tempo *summary*, which provides background material and narrative connectives, but in a condensed form, is equally heightened. While the tempos of *stretch* and *pause*, which work to focus on major or minor keys in a story, to counterpoint movement, are absent or, at best, downgraded. Not so, initially, in film.

Film retained a link to earlier narrative traditions in a way television could not. Could not because it was directly dependent on "working" its air-time, on selling, on sponsorship and on consumption. So, whereas the traditional form of the novel or the joke might not inform TV narrative, the structural aspects of story that these historical forms (and others) utilised continued to find their way into film. Paradoxically, tied up in the horizontal integration of the new media industries, the two mediums found themselves in a symbiotic relationship. As David Cook notes, discussing immediately post-1965 Hollywood narrative:

The audience was composed of the first generation in history that had grown up with the visually, if not intellectually, sophisticated medium of television. Through hours of watching television as children and teenagers, its members knew the language of film explicitly, and when filmmakers like Frankenheimer, Lumet, Penn, and Peckinpah began to move out of the studios in the mid- to late-sixties and to employ the New Wave techniques of the French and Italian cinemas for the first time on the American screen, this young audience liked what it saw.<sup>4</sup>

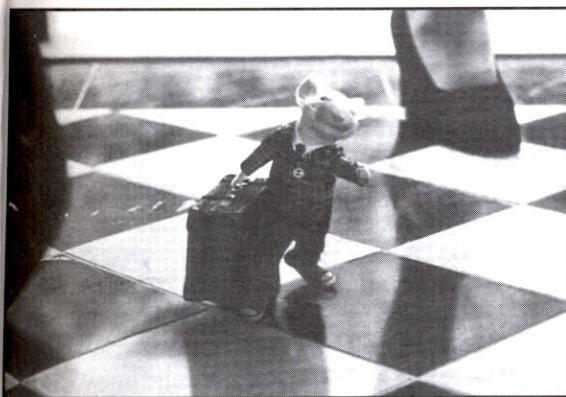
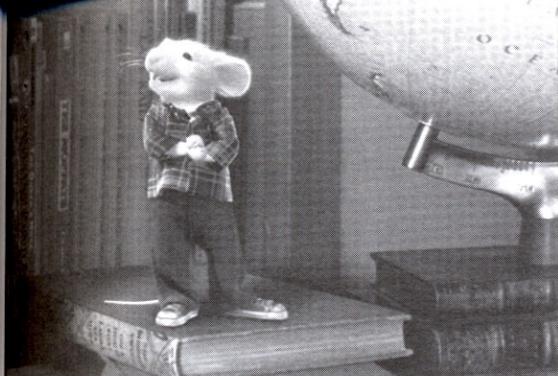
Here then an intriguing Chinese box situation, narrative boxes within boxes, literally, it would seem. Within the discourse of

television, devoted as it has been to *ellipsis* and *summary*, film found its contemporary youth audience. Yet that audience, while initially supporting the kinds of movements Cook identifies, now forms the core of consumers who demand of their films the faster-paced, more episodic structures that television has generated. Either a paradox, or an evolution therefore. However, there is one canonical narrative tempo so far left undiscussed. That is the narrative tempo known as *scene*.

As Gerald Prince points out, *scene* occurs when "discourse time is (considered) equal to story time".<sup>5</sup> It is most often presented in direct opposition to the "condensing" nature of *summary* and it often contains little if any narrative mediation. *Scene*, in this sense, is least directly related to combining authorial control or manipulation of viewpoint with promotion of movement. That is, in *ellipsis* and *stretch* the tempo favours forward movement over mediation. In *stretch* and *pause* the tempo favours mediation over forward movement. In *scene* the equality of the relationship between discourse and story makes audience manipulation via tempo (a component of discourse) less probable. Thus the manipulation has to reside in the story elements not the discourse. An absence of this canonical tempo, *scene*, therefore suggests an absence of story.

The question is: have new film distribution mediums developed since the arrival of television, and up to and including the video cassette, downgraded *scene* and thus downgraded story in film narratives? This question can be held back one moment in order to consider the technological influences on narrative which are at play here.

The video cassette, tied up as it has been with stop-start film viewing and with invoking the ethos of personal choice in the use of the TV for the viewing of films, asks that film narrative be controlled by the individual but not directly influenced by them within the boundaries of the text. That is, the method of watching remains linear, the influence of the audience is (within those boundaries) limited to interrupting the linear flow of



text, and response of the audience is largely left free and untouched outside the core film text. Beyond the domestication of film (a substantial enough influence in itself, of course) the video cassette would seem, on this level, to be of relatively minor importance in the history of film narrative shape.

And yet, let us remember that *ellipsis* and *summary* increase the impact of discourse over story by favouring forward movement over mediation. Thus, if the video cassette, by the very simple and practical action of allowing audiences to impose elliptical jumps and pauses in the film narrative (pauses for getting drinks, rewinding to points of interest etc) then inducing the audience to "rethink" or "summarise" where they are "up to" in the film before proceeding, then the video cassette has further entrenched narrative forms in which the discourse (or the "how" aspects of the viewing) dominate the story (or the "what" elements). To paraphrase that well-known quote: in this way "the medium" has increasingly become the message.

A short case-study, using *Wayne's World*, adds weight to this observation, and to our understanding of the role of new media technology in configuring our contemporary understanding of film narratives. Of course, *Wayne's World* is not chosen at random here. It is thematically located at the nexus between television and film, it is a youth film, and it is included in the Top 50 comedies listed by UK popular film magazine *Total Film* in its November 2000, "The Fifty Greatest Comedies Ever" issue, a magazine whose demographic coverage is precisely that primary youth market for contemporary cinema.

*Wayne's World*, a film which grew out of a "Saturday Night Live" TV sketch starring Mike Myers and Dana Carvey, is the story of "party dudes" Wayne Campbell and Garth Algar, who have their own cable TV show. 'Discovered' by sleazy video producer, Benjamin Oliver, played by Rob Lowe, the pair are offered the chance to shift their show to mainstream stream TV and thus to approach "real" stardom while con-

fronting the possibilities of losing control of their show to the corporate ethos of Oliver's TV-land. Oliver tries to tie up sponsorship for the new show, hooking in a wealthy video arcade owner by offering him a spot on the show. Meanwhile, Wayne falls in love with Cassandra, a beautiful Asian lead singer in a rock band looking for its big break, and Garth tries to find his own way to love, speculating on a relationship with a "mystery woman" he regularly encounters in a cheap roadside diner.

Quite obviously, *Wayne's World* fits well with discussions of the *bricolage* nature of the postmodern text, and its position as "postmodern" is equally supported by its lampooning of "dude" and "TV corporate" characters and by the self-referential nature of the narrative itself, which encourages the audience to feel that it is empowered to participate in the film by the principal characters' "knowing" addresses to camera and the reference to popular cultural icons and advertising slogans. And yet, for the purpose of studying the narrative shape of this film, too great a concentration on the *postmodern* might well be leading us down the wrong track.

The narrative of *Wayne's World* is, in its profoundly episodic nature, televisual not classically filmic. This episodic nature is supported by those direct-to-camera addresses which not only break the narrative but enforce the discourse of that narrative beyond the story. Thus, when Garth allows himself to enter a dream state in order to contemplate what might be possible with his "mystery woman" he does so without moving the primary narrative of the film forward and without introducing or embedding a new narrative strand. A fantasy dream sequence such as this could, in a classically narrated film like *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), for example, create the impetus for the development of character or lead to a dénouement poignant with revelation. Not so here. The sequence is purely self-referential, aimed at a cine-literate audience who "get the joke", and is decidedly self-contained within the narrative structure.

The dénouement of *Wayne's World*, offered in several "choices" with Wayne and Garth suggesting alternate endings and then those endings being played out for the audience, confirms that the film relates to the narrative understandings of a TV audience regardless of the fact that *Wayne's World* is a film whose plot involves TV, not a TV programme whose plot involves film. Importantly, these final scenes are played out in a cable TV studio with the actors surrounded by the technology of TV making and the alternate sequences offered up as much to them (the players remaining static 'on set') as they are to the film's "actual" audience.

Is this, therefore, postmodern? Not in terms of the history of film. Leo Charney, writing on film and the philosophy of modernity, notes this:

... fragmentation marks the heart of film as representation: because it is always fragmentary, always a string of

4 David Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 3rd Ed,( New York: Norton, 1996), 920.

5 Gerald Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1988), 84.

6 Leo Charney, "In a Moment: Film and the Philosophy of Modernity" in Charney, L and Vanessa R. Schwartz (eds) *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 292.

moments, it is never complete and present. Re-presentation, in its very form, played into the evacuation of presence that characterized the modern. There was no present to re-present. . . . However, the emerging form of cinema, as such Soviet filmmakers as Vertov and Eisenstein keenly perceived, allowed modernity's potential drawbacks to become aesthetic advantages: Shock, speed, and dislocation became editing, and the evacuation of presence, in the technique of cinema, became the means by which the view could find a place in film's ceaseless forward movement.<sup>6</sup>

While the "forward movement" Charney mentions barely holds a candle to the elliptical, summarised tempo of a film like *Wayne's World* or other contemporary examples such as *Scream* (1996), *Magnolia* (1999) or *Memento* (2000), the point made here is an extremely relevant one. The act of producing and viewing film refers back to a *modern* not a postmodern imposition of a technological apparatus into the aesthetic space of audiences. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the ways in which both audiences and "creators" have so easily reconfigured ideals of narrative shape in light of film's technological changes are considerable.

To return to the Centre for the Creative and Performing Arts' DVD research project, the children of Cae Top School and Friars School received their freestanding DVD players in the weeks before breaking for Christmas 2000. Their teachers were aware of the existence of DVD but were not themselves DVD users. This was seen as an advantage to the research. The research programme presented to the funding body, the UK National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA), had been one in which the nature of storytelling was to form the core, with an investigation and then creation of additional trial DVDs informed by the results of the research. This was the most obvious plan because, it was argued, many early DVDs either used older CD-ROM formats, which did not exploit the full storytelling potential of this new digital distribution medium (for a start, DVD offers several times the storage capacity of CD and thus several times the opportunity for inclusion of text), or which adopted video cassette formats, offering no supplementary material or interactivity and simply using the format for its improved visual and aural quality.

At the moment when the players were delivered and installed at Cae Top, it was obvious the research was going to discover some fundamentals about the way in which DVD technology is influencing, and will influence further, the ways in which audiences consume the narratives of film, and how filmmakers are changing production practices to create DVDs.

The Cae Top children, around thirty 7-9 year olds, were simply offered the player and a copy of the Rob Minkoff film, *Stuart Little* (1999). This *Stuart Little* DVD had the advantage of offering "over 1 1/2 hours of extra features" but of not being dependent on a personal computer for access to those features (thus not invoking a "computer" sensibility but a sensibility associated with a video player), while also offering a narrative which was based on a traditional story form: E.B.White's classic children's novel *Stuart Little*, first published in 1945.

The children entered the classroom, gathered around the DVD player/monitor in a large group and pressed the play but-

ton. But not the button that played the film. The button they pressed was the one that played the interactive material, specifically "Stuart's Central Park Adventure Game". In fact, by April, several months after the launch of the research project, and even though they knew there was a film on the disc specifically aimed at and relevant to them, the children of Cae Top had not, in the classical sense, "watched" the film of their own accord. Film watching, for them, was fundamentally informed by the interactive manipulation of the narrative provided by the DVD's supplementary material and perhaps, still today in the eyes of the filmmakers, intended to "supplement" the primary film viewing experience. This is dependent on technological advances not until very recently connected with the televisual.

Significantly then, in addition to the impact in the late 1970s of the arrival of video cassette on the rise of discourse over story in film narrative, we might further locate historical changes in the way film stories are told and received back to the technological advances of the early 1980s. It was in 1983 that the compact disc was launched, though it had in fact been around in proto form since Philips and Sony formed an alliance in 1978 to create a uniform disc format for digital disc, and it was in 1984 that the Apple Mac with mouse came into the world, launching the era of the personal computer. Both of these technologies employed high quality, digital non-linear packages at a mass consumer level.

DVD is, at the base point, the bridge between two historical developments, one located in domestic film entertainment (the video cassette) and one which has been located at the epistemological heart of the personal computer—that is, the computer as public and, since 1984, personal "knowledge provider" and "information organiser". It would truistic to point out that the DVD, with its supplementary platforms, provides exactly both these things. Indeed, it is important to go beyond this simple point and consider what effects it additionally produces.

First and foremost, noting the empirical evidence provided by the CCPA's DVD research programme, DVDs promote and develop the idea of film as "game". No longer do audiences simply enter a text expecting to follow its narrative from Point A through to Point Z and to respond to the film text *a posteriori* in ways which reflect personal, cultural, historical and/or aesthetic bias. The expectation that supplementary materials provides is not, in reality, supplementary at all. In the extreme case, as noted in the empirical work with children, the core film narrative disappears entirely, forming the basis of a new narrative whose story is connected with the core but constructed under far more "personalised" methods.

To play a game with a film text is, after all, to personally appropriate it, to place your own stamp on it. This, likewise, matches the growth of the personal computer as "game site", adding increasingly in recent years to its epistemological context. In addition, to marginalise linear narrative is to offer the constructive opportunities of the non-linear to the cine-literate audience. Think here: "make your own film, here are the components, construct your own connections."

This, intriguingly, is not far from the "do your own thing" ethos of the 1960s, which David Cook approaches in his comments on the post 1965 television generation and its impact on film-making. It also plays extremely well to the mass con-

sumerist nature of that post-1950s Western audience. If a film text can be constantly re-appropriated and reconfigured, if its narrative is never fixed because the viewing medium is not dependent on giving primacy to the core, then the film "product" becomes both constantly renewable and the desire for further and more "developed" ways of reading the text, of more texts which have more and alternate stories and non-stories (eg: "situations", vignettes), offers enormous market potential.

Secondly, therefore, DVD has promoted the fast-paced, episodic "advertising" narratives of television. Even when the core text is a well known or classic film text, the conventions of making and watching DVD turn that text into a component of the experience rather than the complete experience. So, for example, *Taxi Driver* (1976) in its Region 2 configuration<sup>7</sup>, contains a Behind-the-Scenes Documentary, a Video Photo Gallery with Commentary, the Original Screenplay, Storyboards, Advertising Materials, the US Theatrical Trailer, and Filmographies. Jean Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1959) contains Animated Chapter Selections, a Poster Gallery, the Original Theatrical Trailer, a remade theatrical trailer from 1983 and *Charlotte et son Jules*, a short film by Jean-Luc Godard. And so it goes: on the Region 1 DVD of Brando's *The Wild One* (1954), the original theatrical trailers; on *Tampopo* (1986), often considered the first parodic "noodle Western" and directed by Juzo Itami, direct scene access, subtitles in Japanese or English and Filmographies; on *Animal Crackers* (1930), the Marx Brothers' classic, captions available in English: never again does the text of those jokes have to disappear in the shotgun style of the brothers' delivery!

Simply put, DVD is offering the melding of entertainment with increased knowledge provision for a film-viewing generation cine-literate enough to cope with the breaking and reconstructing of film narratives and, increasingly, requiring that filmmakers offer that very opportunity. Filmmakers are matching this requirement with additional "behind-the-scenes" materials shot on set, with archival materials, with interviews and documentaries and with filmographic material, all of which invite the audience to interpret and play with the core narrative and make of the film story what they will. This is the case from the most esoteric of art cinema to the most mainstream of Hollywood product. Indeed, a mainstream film such as Steven Soderbergh's *Out of Sight* (1998), starring George Clooney and Jennifer Lopez, substantially uses DVD's supplementary platforms to give flesh to the characters by Clooney and Lopez, showing casting sessions and interviews, and shifting a discussion of Soderbergh's directing toward what might traditionally be called the "auteurist", simply by highlighting his aesthetic vision in a series of personal "commentaries". But there is an even more pervasive narrative shift here which shouldn't go unnoticed.

Whereas television and the attendant technology of the video cassette have produced a style of narrative which favours discourse over story and which gives primacy to the tempos of *ellipsis* and *summary* over those of *stretch* and *pause*, DVD returns the film narrative to its more traditional or "classical" position, albeit within a very much altered set of circumstances. Such simple things as the ability to freeze-frame a sequence or scan slowly through it, which DVD provides, highlights the

importance of *stretch* or *pause* in the construction and consideration of film narratives. Likewise, while *summary* has increasingly been employed to move narrative forward in the fast-paced ideals of contemporary Western film, on DVD it also incorporates the other half of its narratological character: that is, to provide background material to points of action. DVD certainly encourages audiences to consider this; providing background, after all, is one of its "selling points".

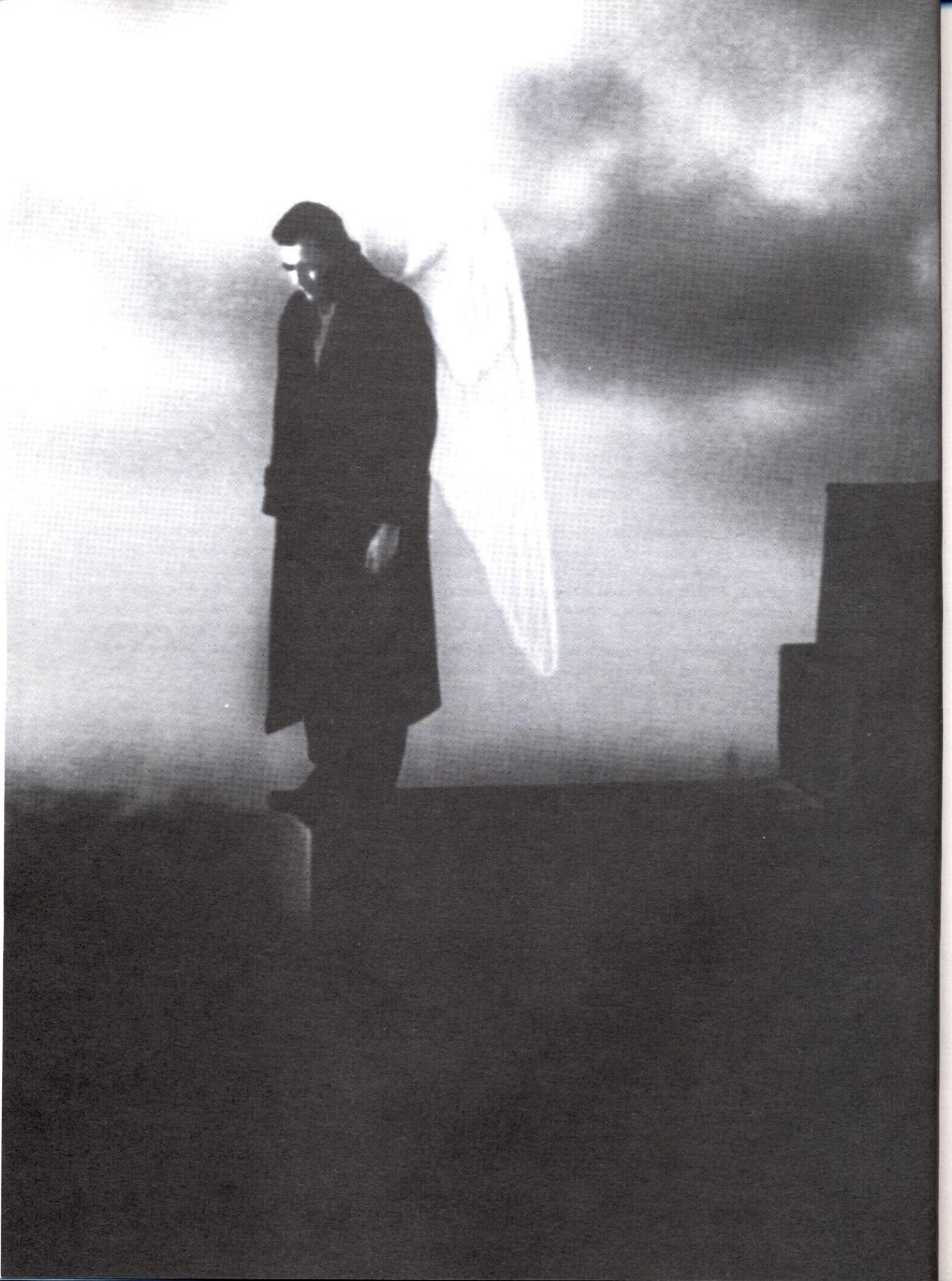
Finally, while it would be premature to suggest that the impact of DVD is challenging the notion that the "medium" is, in fact, "the message" and, on the evidence here, such an argument might seem strange in itself, it is true to say that the use of DVD is evening up the weighting between discourse and story in the construction of *scene*.

With Charney's comments on early film texts and the aesthetics of modernity in mind, it can be said that this current situation likewise has much to do with an opening up of a space for the viewer. In DVD's case, this space is concerned with the renewal and appropriation of the film narrative by its interruption and reconstruction and (perhaps only alleged) supplementation. This sort of appropriation is not out of keeping with the technological, cultural and economic shifts that have impacted on film narrative in recent years, particularly considering we have moved a long way from the mass production, Fordist ideals of those early twentieth century film days to the mass consumption ideals of the early twenty-first.

That DVD references a "new modernity", rather than a "post-modernity", is striking in its empowerment of both audience and filmmaker to enliven the core narrative with aesthetic form constantly open to transformation. Indeed, asking that each transformation somehow presents better opportunities for story construction than the one before makes plain that progress and technology, despite evoking postmodern angst, cannot easily be detached from each other. That this story is not necessarily only located in the ideas and work of the producer but also in the ideas and work of the consumer is evidence that film makes plain those ideals of modernity. Ideals, that is, which fed the birth of film, and continue to assist us to produce, and to come to terms with, its future narrative shapes and styles.

This DVD film research was inaugurally funded by the UK National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA). Thanks to them.

7 DVDs are released on a staggered "regional" release pattern not dissimilar to the patterns for videotape cassette and cinema releases. This obviously maximises market potential for producers/distributors because a film can be "launched" several times. Region 1 covers the USA and Canada. Region 2 covers Europe, the Middle East, the Republic of South Africa and Japan. Region 3 is South East Asia and Taiwan. Region 4 is Central America, South America, Australia, Mexico and New Zealand. Region 5 is the Russian Federation, Africa except Egypt and the Republic of South Africa, India and Pakistan. Region 6 is China. The importance of film distributors' attempts to regionally encode DVDs to increase market potential must be noted here as it reflects on the fact that DVD is seen very much as a market-oriented distribution medium, driven by the domestication of the film text, and associated with the "re-versioning" of core texts to suit particular markets.



# Narration and Focalisation in *Wings of Desire*

Edward Branigan's book *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (1992) illustrates in its very title a major development that has taken place in the study of narrative film over the last two decades: a move away from a text-based structural analysis towards a cognitive analysis of the comprehension of narratives. Cognitive film narratologists do not focus exclusively on films in themselves but on the spectator's comprehension of films.

David Bordwell initiated a cognitive analysis of filmic comprehension in his book *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985). Bordwell argues that the logical form of a narrative film is initially incomplete, but is enriched, or completed, by the spectator's activity of inference generation. In order to complete a narrative film's logical form, the spectator must possess "narrative competence", a mental schema (that is, implicit, intuitive knowledge) that guides each spectator's comprehension of narrative films. The film's plot consists of a series of "cues" (such as gaps in the narrative events, monocular movement parallax, etc.) that trigger and constrain the spectator's activity of inference generation. This activity enables the spectator to gradually build up a mental representation of the film's story world.

Branigan's book significantly enriches and advances Bordwell's theory. Branigan has developed a sophisticated model of the film spectator's narrative competence, but especially of filmic narration, which determines the way narrative information is conveyed to the spectator. One of the key features of Branigan's theory is his account of the way spectators infer levels and agents of narration in order to process and comprehend narrative information. He persuasively argues that different agents operate on different levels of narration. In the following pages I shall focus on Branigan's theory of the narrator, character, and focaliser, three different agents who convey different types of narrative information to the spectator. (I shall also refer to two other agents: the implied author, who conveys non-fictional information to the spectator, such as the names of the actors, technicians, and the studio; and to the invisible observer.) My main aim is to apply Branigan's cognitive theory of filmic narration to a film that makes explicit and then playfully renders ambiguous the boundaries between narrative agents and levels of narration—namely, Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire* (1987). I shall also consider

other examples in passing, particularly *Knick Knack* (John Lasseter, 1989) and *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960).

## Edward Branigan on Narrative Agents

To study narrative is to find out what is happening in a film. To study narration is to find out how spectators acquire knowledge about what is happening in a film's narrative. Filmic narration therefore mediates between the narrative and the spectator; it governs how spectators acquire knowledge about a film's narrative. Narration determines the flow of narrative information, and one of the aims of a theory of filmic narration is to describe how information is distributed by particular modes of narration. The narrative agent is an essential component of narration through which narrative information is filtered. For Branigan, a theory of agents requires a tripartite distinction between narrators, characters, and focalisers. A character is an agent whom spectators comprehend as existing on the level of the narrative—that is, an agent who experiences narrative events directly and who acts or is acted upon in the narrative world. A character whose experiences of the narrative world are then conveyed to the spectator (by the narrator) becomes a focaliser. Narrators, on the contrary, do not exist in the narrative; they exist outside it on the level of narration. This means that they have the ability to influence the shape and direction of the narrative.

One of the most important contributions Branigan makes to the study of filmic narration is his rigorous definition of focalisation in film:

Focalization (reflection) involves a character neither speaking (narrating, reporting, communicating) nor acting (focusing, focused by), but rather actually experiencing something through seeing or hearing it. Focalization also extends to more complex experiencing of objects: thinking, remembering, interpreting, wondering, fearing, believing, desiring, understanding, feeling guilt.<sup>1</sup>

Branigan then distinguishes two types of focalisation, each of which represents a different level of characters' experiences. External focalisation represents characters' awareness, but

<sup>1</sup> Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (New York and London: Routledge: 1992), 101.

from outside characters (it is semi-subjective, in traditional terminology). Internal focalisation represents characters' private and subjective experiences—ranging from simple perception (optical vantage point) to deeper thoughts (dreams, hallucinations, memories).

The narrator is the third major agent in film. A character can become a narrator—or, at least, a homo-diegetic narrator, that is, a narrator portrayed in the narrative by a character. This type of character-narrator is prevalent in films such as *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), in which a character narrates the narrative events in the form of flashbacks. But whether a film contains a homo-diegetic narrator or not, it is still narrated by a higher level narrator, one who does not exist in the world of the narrative. This implicit narrator is an agent who exists on the level of narration—s/he is an omniscient "master of ceremonies" who does not see anything from a perspective within the narrative, but can only report what happens from a position outside. (In the following pages, the term "narrator" shall be used to refer exclusively to this implicit narrator.) Although the narrator is absent from the narrative, his/her presence is nonetheless felt on the level of narration. For example, film techniques that cannot be directly attributed to (or motivated by) a character in a film attest to the existence of the narrator. These include: unmotivated camera movements (camera movements not motivated by the movements of a character or narrative objects), intertitles, foreshadowing effects, and so on. (Shot changes are usually motivated by character movement, character glances off-frame, or by off-screen—but still diegetic—sounds and voices.) Such forms of discourse are not produced by characters in the film, so they can only be attributed to a narrator. The work of the narrator is always present in the film—as is evident in the very discursive activity of the film; in other words, the very acts of seeing shots on screen and hearing speech and sound attest to the existence of a narrator. Yet the narrator's presence is concealed from the spectator most of the time, for the film's discursive activity is usually motivated by the characters. But when such activity cannot be motivated by the characters, then the presence of the narrator becomes apparent.

Finally, we need to briefly consider one other type of agent—the implied author. This term refers to an element of narrative competence the spectator applies to a film to comprehend (more specifically, identify a source for) non-fictional information, such as the film's title, credit sequence, non-diegetic music, explanatory titles, and so on. More generally, Branigan defines the "voice" of the implied author as "an implicit extra-fictional narration" that "defines the limits of what can be seen and heard by us in the film but without defining the conditions of its own existence; one, moreover, which is able to predict events and anticipate the moral of the story ..."<sup>2</sup> Seymour Chatman<sup>3</sup> argues that the implied author is the silent source of all information in a film; he/she is the inventor who remains silent but who delegates the narrator to speak for him/her. This distinction between silent inventor and transmitter is crucial for Chatman because it enables the film analyst to account for ironic and facetious texts—in other words, it enables the analyst to distinguish between the literal

meaning intended by a narrator and the ironic meaning intended by the implied author. It should be evident that the competence required by the spectator to comprehend the implied author is "top-down"—in this instance, extremely contingent, and can only be applied with a degree of uncertainty (as we shall see ahead). This also applies to a lesser degree to the narrator, whose presence can be more strongly comprehended. Finally, the characters and focalisers are the agents most clearly comprehended by the spectator.

Branigan's distinction of agents (narrators/characters/focalisers) and types of focalisation (external/internal), enables us to identify the following four basic types of shot:

- (1) non-focalised or "objective" shots, or shots directly motivated by a narrator;
- (2) externally focalised shots, which represent a character's awareness of narrative events. Such shots are comprehended by the employment of the eyeline match: we see what the character sees, when s/he sees it, but not from his/her exact spatial position;
- (3) internally focalised shots (surface), which represent a character's experience of narrative events, as in optical point-of-view shots: we see what the character sees, when s/he sees it and from his/her exact spatial position; and
- (4) internally focalised shots (depth), which directly represent a character's complex experiences—dreams, memories, and so on.

As I pointed out above, Branigan argues that these various levels and agents of narration constitute spectators' narrative competence, which aids their comprehension of narrative films. In other words, the levels of narration and the agents of narrative information are hypotheses and inferences spectators impose on a film to comprehend it (motivate its shots, understand the relevance of narrative information, and so on): "Such concepts as 'narrator', 'character', and 'implied author' (and perhaps even 'camera') are then merely convenient labels used by the spectator in marking epistemological boundaries, or disparities, within an ensemble of knowledge; or rather, the labels become convenient in responding to narrative."<sup>4</sup> The cognitive approach proposes that comprehension of a narrative film is not fixed and determined by the film itself. The spectator is engaged in an ongoing activity of applying hypotheses and inferences to films.

We can go so far as to say that what exist on the movie screen are simply changing patterns of light and shade, which are perceived together with a series of sounds that somehow relate to these patterns on screen. In comprehending a film, the spectator transforms this raw data into a coherent mental representation (the film's *fabula* or *diegesis*). Some of the spectator's activity is automatic (bottom-up processing), but other aspects are more contingent; that is, dependent upon his/her specialised knowledge or competence of cinema (top-down processing). This emphasis on top-down processing suggests that the spectator generates non-demonstrative inferences—i.e., inferences which are defeasible (that is, flexible and open to revision). The spectator's construction of a mental represen-

tation of the film's diegesis/*fabula* is not, therefore, a simple, linear, automatic process, but is an ongoing activity that is continually modified, corrected, and improved.

Despite the dominance of top-down processes in comprehending narrative films, it is important to emphasise, as Branigan does, that both processes operate simultaneously in comprehending characters, objects, levels of narration, narrators, various types of shot, camera movements, and so on from the patterns of light and shade on the screen. This raises the questions: How do we infer a level of narration or comprehend a camera movement? And which process dominates the comprehension of these particular "objects"? The film presents spectators with stimuli, or a series of traces, which require comprehension. A series of traces we need to consider, especially in relation to *Wings of Desire*, are those spectators label "camera movement".

### Camera Movement

To demonstrate that camera movements are not signified entirely by the text itself (are not wholly bottom-up stimuli), we shall consider an image from one of John Lasseter's short computer-generated 3-D animations. In *Knick Knack* (USA 1989) spectators comprehend one of the opening shots as a camera movement—the "camera" "tracks" from a collection of souvenirs from sunny countries to a snowman encased in a snowy landscape in a glass bubble. But this shot was not produced by a tracking camera; indeed, it was not even produced by a camera, for it was entirely generated on a computer. (Conventional cartoons, of course, are filmed using a camera, but the camera is usually fixed.) The computer has been programmed to manipulate the background and produce a series of traces on screen that the spectator comprehends as "camera tracks to the right", even though no camera was involved in the production of these traces. David Bordwell makes this point (in relation to conventional cartoons) in a 1977 essay "Camera Movement and Cinematic Space."<sup>5</sup> He argues that we cannot adequately develop a theory of camera movement by relying on the notion of a profilmic event filmed by an actual camera. He suggests we must divorce the cues, or traces on film from the camera and the profilmic events. In other words, it is not sufficient to theorise the *production* of these traces—a camera physically moving through space; rather the film analyst must instead concentrate on the *reception* of these traces—how the spectator comprehends them as a moving camera.

For Bordwell, a number of perceptual cues in a shot can be comprehended as subjective movement. One such cue is the monocular movement parallax, which applies to both a perceiving subject moving through space, and a stationary subject perceiving a moving object. The concept of monocular movement parallax states that a moving subject will perceive objects gliding past his/her field of vision; the closer the objects, the faster they glide by, due to a differential angular velocity between objects close to the perceiving subject and objects far away from the perceiving subject. In other words, a moving subject perceives a continual displacement of his/her visual field. By contrast, a stationary subject perceiving a moving object will perceive a partial displacement of his/her visual field.

Bordwell then applies the concept of monocular movement parallax to the cinema: "For the camera movement effect to occur, monocular movement parallax must be read from the entire visual field. If only a part or item in the field yields that differential angular velocity across time, then camera movement will not be specified—only the movement of the object will be specified."<sup>6</sup> Cues comprehended as camera movement "install the viewer as a subject moving through a fictive scenographic layout."<sup>7</sup>

Comprehension of camera movement is predominately determined by cues in the film—in other words, is predominately comprehended in bottom-up fashion, whereas other aspects of a shot (if it is internally or externally focalised, for example) rely much more strongly upon top-down competence. All top-down comprehension is defeasible and thereby open to revision, for it is not as deterministic as bottom-up comprehension. To comprehend a particular shot as focalised is to impose upon it an anthropomorphic reading in which the "camera" imitates a character's experience of the narrative world. Bordwell points out that American and Canadian avant-garde films challenge an anthropomorphic reading of shots, and cites Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale*. To what extent do the camera movements in *Wings of Desire* challenge an anthropomorphic reading of shots? And how easily does the spectator comprehend one of its dominant oppositions—the distinction between black & white/colour as a convention for coding focalisation (respectively, focalisation around angels and children/focalisation around adults)?

Branigan's theory of levels and agents of narration (and Bordwell's theory of camera movement) can be applied to any narrative film, whether it strongly adheres to these levels and agents, or creatively manipulates and transforms them. In *Wings of Desire*, the boundary between character and narrator becomes ambiguous, whereas in "classical" films such as Hitchcock's *Psycho*, for example, the boundaries are clear and distinct (comparatively speaking, for, as I pointed out above, spectators infer narrative agents, and such inferences are defeasible). First I shall analyse the opening of *Psycho*, emphasising the gradual transition from the dominance of the implied author and narrator to the dominance of characters, before moving on to analyse *Wings of Desire*.

### Focalisation in *Psycho*

As the credit sequence of *Psycho* unwinds, the implied author's presence is dominant (which is apparent in all films, of course). The non-diegetic music is also a mark of the implied author's presence. The first three shots of the film are long shots, panning right, across a city sky line. The camera's movement and spatial location are not motivated by a character—these shots do not represent the point-of-view of a character looking across the city sky line. Furthermore, what city is this?

2 Branigan, 90-91.

3 Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), especially Chapters 5 and 6.

4 Branigan, 85.

5 David Bordwell, "Camera Movement and Cinematic Space", *Ciné-Tracts*, 1, 2 (1977), 19-26.



The name of the city is superimposed over two shots (the name appears just before a dissolve from one shot to another, masking the transition). We are informed that this is Phoenix, Arizona. But who informs us? Here, a measure of uncertainty enters the analysis. Or, more positively, we can say that the titles can be described in more than one way. It is arguably the implied author, informing the spectator of the non-fictional name of the city. But at the same time, we can argue that the name of the city has been appropriated and absorbed by the narrator into a fictional world. Then the day, date, and the time are imposed over the shots (again, just before shot transitions)—it is Friday December the eleventh at two forty-three p.m. This is information relevant to the fictional world, and is conveyed to the spectator by the narrator.

Furthermore, both pieces of narrative information could have been conveyed to us by the characters in the narrative. For example, Sam could have told Marion the time, or one of them could have been reading a local newspaper, indicating the day and the fact that they are in Phoenix. This mode of conveying narrative information is conventional and unexceptional, and has the effect of making the narrator less noticeable. But in *Psycho*, the implied author and/or narrator directly supply us with the name of the city, the date and the time. Their presence at this moment in the film is quite dominant. Their presence is also indicated in the following two shots.

Being omniscient, they know exactly where two of the film's main characters, Sam and Marion, are located; in shot 4 they direct the camera to their hotel room window and in shot 5 allow it to transcend space by entering the room. In the hotel room, the camera movement gradually attaches itself to the movement of the characters, making the presence of the implied author and narrator less overt. After Sam and Marion have dressed, we are presented with two shots of Sam (shots 13 and 15), looking out of the window, from Marion's approximate point-of-view. In other words, the spectator comprehends these shots of Sam as being externally focalised around Marion's vision. Sam is seen returning the look; he does not look directly into the camera, but off-screen left, indicating that the shot of him is not internally focalised around Marion. These shots of Sam are alternated with two shots of Marion (14 and 16). But in shot 16, Marion turns around (turns her back on Sam). Shot 17 returns the spectator to Sam standing by the window, framed in the same way as shots 13 and 15. Whereas shots 13 and 15 are externally focalised around Marion, the spectator implicitly comprehends shot 17 as non-focalised (as an "objective shot"). In other words, the shot of Sam is repeated for a third time, but is comprehended differently. As shot 17 progresses, Sam walks towards the middle of the hotel room where Marion is now located—she has turned around again, although the spectator did not see her perform this action.

Even though shot 17 is initially composed in the same way as shots 13 and 15, it is comprehended as non-focalised because Marion has turned her back on Sam in shot 16 (her look does not motivate the cut back to Sam). This comprehension of shot 17 as non-focalised is then strengthened as Sam walks into the middle of the room and faces Marion in a two-shot.

Branigan's definition of focalisation depends on a rigorous separation between characters and narrators. For Branigan, only characters can act as focalisers because they are able to experience directly the narrative events, whereas narrators cannot, although it is the narrator who conveys the experiences of the focalisers to the spectators. Focalisers only experience; they do not convey their experiences to spectators. It is the task of agents higher up to convey these experiences to spectators.

### Focalisation in *Wings of Desire*

Branigan has accurately defined the two main levels of a narrative film (narrative/narration) and the main agents who inhabit these levels (characters and focalisers/narrators respectively). These levels are rigidly adhered to in "classical" narrative films, but in *Wings of Desire* they are rendered ambiguous. I would argue that the uniqueness of *Wings of Desire* is that the main protagonists—the angels Damiel and Cassiel—possess qualities of characters and narrators at the same time, and inhabit both the level of narrative and of narration, or, more accurately, exist between the two levels.

If the angels are not characters or narrators, then perhaps they conform to the conditions of the invisible observer, a familiar agent in traditional film theory, but which Branigan re-defines as part of the spectator's narrative competence; that is, a necessary agent the film spectator employs to motivate and comprehend a shot or sequence of shots.

What is being analyzed is not simply a technique, or a device or a style, but the elements that define a mode of comprehension. As a convention of reading, invisible observation asks the spectator to accept (or impose) a restriction on the amount and type of knowledge available from the text at a given moment. A convenient way to describe this particular restriction on knowledge is to imagine an "observer" with specific qualities.<sup>8</sup>

We shall consider in detail Branigan's discussion of the invisible observer to see if it constitutes part of the knowledge necessary for a spectator to motivate and comprehend the shots in *Wings of Desire* focalised around the angels.

Branigan identifies six characteristics of the invisible observer:<sup>9</sup>

(1) Invisibility. The observer has no causal interaction with the events which are witnessed; s/he is an eavesdropper who is unheard as well as unseen. Although, in *Wings of Desire*, the angels do not interact with narrative events (a source of displeasure for the angel Damiel), they are seen by children and, of course, by the spectator. They are invisible only to adults (although their presence can be felt by ex-angels such as Peter Falk).

(2) Ubiquity. The observer has the ability to move instantaneously through scenic space and to remember what has been

seen and heard, but cannot move forward or backward in time. The angels move instantaneously through scenic space, which becomes noticeable in *Wings of Desire* because the invisible observer can actually be seen by the spectator (although not by characters). For example, early on in the film, Damiel effortlessly walks through a number of apartment buildings, observing their occupants. He then looks out of the window and sees an ambulance travelling along the auto-bahn. Outside the apartment buildings, and high up, the camera begins to follow the ambulance. Conventionally, spectators would comprehend this shot as non-focalised, but here it is focalised around Damiel. We then cut to inside the ambulance, and see a pregnant woman. The camera moves towards her stomach, and Damiel's hand is suddenly shown entering the filmic space from off-screen space shown to be empty moments before. Furthermore, the angels remember what has been seen and heard because they make notes. In two other sequences, Cassiel transcends time—a sequence in which he travels along the streets at night is filmed in fast action, and, travelling in the back seat of a period car, he looks outside the window (eye-line match) and sees the bombed Berlin of 1945 (documentary footage). The car then arrives on a film set which is full of Nazi soldiers, momentarily confusing the spectator as to the exact date of the narrative event. There is no evidence that the angels can move forward in time.

(3) Alertness. The observer is attentive to events so as to be able to avoid obstructions and assume the best or perfect angle on the actions at all times. This characteristic applies to the angels, since they are not bound by the physical constraints of the diegesis (hence giving them the characteristic of being narrators).

(4) Neutrality. The observer assumes a "standard", often straight-on angle to the action. The angels have the ability to observe narrative events both from human eye-level (hence imitating the invisible observer found in other films) and also from high up. Some camera movements can be comprehended as the movement of an angel moving from a high position to eye level position. In one scene Damiel sits at the top of a circus tent and watches Marion on the trapeze. Later in the scene Damiel moves from the top of the tent to ground level. The shot of him descending is initially internally focalised (we experience his optical point-of-view as he descends from the top of the tent to ground level). When the camera reaches ground level, we then see Damiel enter the shot. Most spectators initially comprehend the shot as Damiel's optical point-of-view (although not automatically; some spectators, finding this shot unusual, cannot comprehend it as the point-of-view of a descending angel). That the same shot is then comprehended as a non-focalised shot of Damiel is quite common in *Wings of Desire*, and indeed in film in general, as both Bordwell and Branigan have emphasised. Bordwell writes that: "It is a permissible play with convention to have a character enter a

6 Bordwell, 22.

7 Bordwell, 23.

8 Branigan, 172.

9 Branigan, 171-72. The following six points are shortened summaries of Branigan's text, although I have added the information concerning their relation to *Wings of Desire*.

Marion on a trapeze.



shot which has been initially established as her or his point of view.”<sup>10</sup> For Branigan, “the presence of the POV shot as a narrative structure cannot be determined mechanically by measuring such material divisions as shots. Even in a wider context, the relationship between narration and the editing of shots is not fixed but must be discovered.”<sup>11</sup>

(5) Impersonality. The unique personality traits as well as the gender, age, race, class etc. of the observer are muted—made indefinite—so that what is displayed is strictly a perceptual experience and, in principle, inter-subjective, i.e., regulated by general norms of seeing. This point certainly does not apply to the angels, precisely because they are symbols of Christianity and because they are depicted in the diegesis. But the perceptual experience displayed is inter-subjective in that it represents the experience of all angels (and children). Spectators automatically share this perception for the simple reason that we can see the angels and because we see the narrative events in black & white (the shift from black & white to colour will be discussed below).

(6) Passivity. Observation is governed by the limits of immediate space and time. This last point assumes that the invisible observer exists within the film’s diegesis, is constrained by its physical space-time boundaries, a condition which does not apply to the angels, even though they are visible in the diegesis. The angels can also read the minds of characters (conveyed to the spectator as voice-over) and see their memories of Berlin in World War II (conveyed to the spectator in the form of documentary footage).

In *Wings of Desire*, the angels, together with a number of unusual camera movements they motivate, challenge the spectator’s mode of narrative film comprehension, because the amount and type of narrative information they impart to the spectator is radically different from the information imparted to the spectator from other agents depicted in the diegesis (that is, characters). When we first see the angels, we expect them to behave like characters (especially when children notice them in the opening sequence), but we soon realise they are invisible to adults and have characteristics spectators usually attribute to invisible narrators. The restrictions spectators normally impose on knowledge conveyed by characters must be revised, for the spatio-temporal restrictions we attribute to characters are not applicable to Damiel and Cassiel. The angels do not conform to the boundaries each spectator imposes upon the film to comprehend the status of the information. The film establishes a number of unique intrinsic norms the spectator learns only after seeing the film a number of times, for the spectator versed in classical narrative film does not possess the necessary knowledge to make sense of these intrinsic norms on first viewing.

That children can see the angels, whereas adult characters cannot, again raises the issue of the ambiguous status of the angels, for they must, to some extent, be diegetic. But the angels, like narrators but unlike characters (potential focalisers) do not participate in the narrative world. They merely observe, look, and narrate. They cannot experience the colour, weight, texture, smell, and spatio-temporal dimensions of the here and

now. This produces conflict for Damiel, who has fallen in love with Marion, the trapeze artist, and wants to experience that love with her. On a narratological level, *Wings of Desire* is about Damiel wanting to lose his non-diegetic narrator status and become a character.

Focalisation is explicitly codified in *Wings of Desire* by the opposition black & white and colour sequences (another of the film's intrinsic norms). Black & white signifies focalisation around an angel (or occasionally around a child), for it represents his/her detached awareness/experience of the narrative world (an experience devoid of most sensory data, as we have just seen). Colour signifies focalisation around potential/actual human characters (implied diegetic focalisers, or actual focalisers—that is, characters on screen). The shift from black & white to colour marks the distinction between detachment from the narrative world (by the observing angels, who act as potential narrators) and full experience of the narrative world (by characters who act as potential focalisers).

The first use of colour occurs in the scene in the tent discussed above. The scene consists of Marion on the trapeze swinging back and forth, Damiel at the top of the tent, and the ring master on the ground. We first see Damiel in long shot looking off-screen, moving his head from left to right. Cut to Marion on the trapeze, swinging from left to right, with the camera following her movement. The camera's placement and movement are therefore motivated by and are internally focalised around Damiel. But within the context of Branigan's theory, this shot should be comprehended as non-focalised, because it does not represent the experience of a character. However, the shots of Marion are comprehended as focalised because spectators actually see the non-character agent (Damiel). We then cut back to Damiel, this time in medium close-up, as he follows Marion's movement. In the following shot we cut back to Marion (hence, maintaining a shot/reverse shot pattern). However, the following shot does not cut back to Damiel, but instead shows Marion, in a colour shot, from an eye level point-of-view. The camera looks up at Marion, and the space occupied by Damiel is shown in the background. Yet Damiel is absent from the space, strengthening the assumption that the black & white shots of Marion are not focalised around a character and indicating that the colour shot represents the visual experience of an adult (rather than an angel or a child). Damiel still occupies this space, but the spectator he can no longer see him. We then have an extraordinary analytic cut-in, as the camera shows Damiel, in a black & white shot, in medium close-up again. The shot depicts a detail of the previous space, but in black & white rather than colour, and with Damiel now shown occupying that space, who was shown to be absent in the previous (colour) shot.

This phenomenon of overlapping space—first filmed in black & white, then in colour—is another intrinsic norm of *Wings of Desire*, and is employed a number of times in the film, particularly towards the end, when Damiel is transformed into a character and talks to Cassiel. The shift from black & white to colour is not determined by the angels, but a more conventional (and higher level) narrator (or possibly implied author) existing outside the fictional world, who

decides whether to portray that world in black & white or in colour. Furthermore, this shift signifies a radical change in point-of-view, from narrator-angels to characters (the colour shot is most plausibly focalised around the ring master). I suggest that the reason for the shift occurring at this particular time is to introduce this unique intrinsic norm to the spectator, so that s/he will be better prepared to comprehend the second time the shift from black & white to colour occurs—in Marion's caravan.

In the caravan Damiel observes Marion's belongings and reads her thoughts. He turns his back on Marion and looks at a number of photographs and "picks up" a stone. When he turns around, he sees Marion sitting on the edge of her bed, beginning to undress (filmed as a two-shot). We cut to a shot of Damiel watching, then to a close-up of Marion's back and left shoulder as Damiel's hand enters the frame and runs along her shoulder, as Marion's thoughts continue to be heard on the sound track ("I only need to be ready, and every man in the world will look at me"). We then cut to a shot of Damiel; the camera remains still as he walks out of the frame (the camera therefore disengages itself from him). We then cut to a long shot of Marion sitting on the bed. The shot slowly changes from black & white to colour as Marion puts on her dressing gown and walks to the other end of the caravan. This transition is extremely rare in narrative film, and so its comprehension involves contingent top-down processes that most spectators may not possess. For me, this colour transition signifies the disappearance of Damiel from Marion's caravan (he's a polite angel!), leaving the shot to be comprehended as objective.<sup>12</sup>

This discussion of *Wings of Desire* does not pretend to be exhaustive, but merely begins to highlight those moments in the film that challenge the spectator's activity of comprehension. For example, it raises questions such as how the spectator comprehends agents, camera movements, and changes from black & white to colour in narrative films. *Wings of Desire* therefore draws attention to spectators' narrative competence (their implicit, intuitive knowledge) in comprehending narrative films, and tests the boundaries of that competence.

10 Bordwell, 25.

11 Branigan, 142.

12 After reading this passage, Edward Branigan offered me a far more accurate description of this transition. He writes that: "This transition from b & w to color seems to be the transition from Damiel's POV (i.e., internal focalization of an explicit fictional, nondiegetic narrator) to implicit fictional, diegetic narration (i.e., an invisible, objective diegetic observer" (personal communication).

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Gladiatorial combat in the Roman colosseum



## Narrative and Spectacle in *Gladiator*

Does Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) provide a critique of spectacle? Such a question may appear odd insofar as the film's most engaging moments are undoubtedly those which are spectacular—the opening battle scene and the scenes of gladiatorial combat. On this manifest level the film clearly offers a celebration of spectacle rather than a critique. And without a doubt, audiences, myself included, were impressed by *Gladiator*'s "wow" factor, by the elements of delight and spectacular stimulation which make up what Simon During, with reference to early cinema's celebratory mechanisms, has called "the cinema of action-attractions".<sup>1</sup> Why, then, would I ask whether *Gladiator* offers a *critique* of spectacle?

To answer such a query we must ask ourselves what *Gladiator* is about. The film's main narrative line concerns the story of Maximus/Russell Crowe and his quest to avenge the murder of his wife and child by the new Emperor of Rome, Commodus/Joaquin Phoenix. There is, however, also a sub-plot concerning the corruption of the Roman Republic and the leading astray of the Roman people—the "mob"—in the name of Commodus's ambitions of power. And what is the main way in which Commodus leads the Roman mob astray? By *spectacle*—the gladiatorial games. The film offers its own extra-diegetic comments—we might say that the film has a "voice"<sup>2</sup>—on the moral and political value of "spectacle" as it takes place within the diegesis of *Gladiator*. The film is arguing that Rome is self-destructing because it is hypnotised by the spectacular produc-

1 Simon During, "Towards the Global Popular? Knowledge, Strength and Magic" in David Bennett (ed.) *Cultural Studies: Pluralism and Theory*, (Parkville: University of Melbourne, 1993), 133-155.

2 I am referring to Bill Nichols' notion of "voice" in documentary films (though he believes it is a term that could be applied to any film form). It designates "that which conveys to us a sense of a text's social point of view, of how it is speaking to us and how it is organizing the materials it is presenting to us". Bill Nichols, "The 'Voice' of Documentary" in Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods Volume II*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1985, 260.

by **Richard Rushton**



Maximus inspecting the troops

tions of the Colosseum and that it is therefore nothing less than spectacle which provides the environment in which tyranny thrives. Ultimately, for there to be any hope for democracy, freedom, happiness and "the greatness of Rome", such a society of the spectacle must be renounced and overthrown, a process which the film duly enacts. The moral lesson of the film, if I can be so bold as to attribute a "moral" dimension to the film on a historical/social/political level, is that democracy and freedom are only possible if we first of all free ourselves from the lure of spectacle.

And yet, as spectators of the film are we not also entranced by spectacle, the filmed spectacles of the Colosseum and its gladiatorial combats? Are we not reduced to members of the mob, baying for blood and action and spectacle and sensation? Are we not duped and lulled and drugged into a willing tyranny of special effects or, at least, of spectacular combats? Are we not also and ultimately reduced to subjects of a tyrannical order, to subjects who willingly and joyfully submit to Hollywood's imperialism and its spectacles of action-attraction? The film is drawing an analogy, "unconsciously", we might say, between the tyranny of Commodus and the tyranny of the contemporary Hollywood blockbuster with the imperialism of both dependent upon the audience's enslavement to spectacle.

But let's not get too far ahead of ourselves. What is the nature of the "spectacular" scenes in *Gladiator*? The combat scenes are not bombastic, "thrills'n'spills" effects; there are no helicopters in tunnels, no acrobatic dangling-from-harrier-jump-jet feats, no jumbo jets landing in Las Vegas. Rather, the action scenes in *Gladiator* are virtuosic, montage-laden combinations of "shock-effects" in a manner reminiscent of Eisenstein. In fact, the complexity and displacement of these scenes was a major irritant for some reviewers of the film. John Simon in the *National Review* declared that what happens in the action scenes in *Gladiator* is most often "hard to tell because Scott's chief technique through much of the film is lightning-fast cutting, so that chopped-off limbs, severed heads, gushing blood, etc., fly by so quickly that you can't be sure of what you saw, or whether indeed you saw it."<sup>3</sup>

We may, then, despite Simon's reservations, be treading upon the territory of a truly radical, post-classical Hollywood form of filmmaking that is characterised by what Thomas Elsaesser has called "engulfment". For Elsaesser, engulfment is a characteristic trend in contemporary Hollywood cinema that brings forth spectacular visual effects which directly push the viewer into moods of awe and wonder, but also into modes of disorientation, affective complexity and shock. This engulfing mode of address occurs when a film "can be seen to

suspend narrative in favour of spatial play or aural perspectivism. Instead of the bounded image," Elsaesser continues, "the mode of engulfment works with the ambient image in which it is sound that now 'locates', 'cues' and even 'narrates' the image, producing a more corporeal set of perceptions."<sup>4</sup>

Such claims surely pertain to *Gladiator*; the combat scenes clearly suspend narrative in favour of visual display, and the sheer incomprehensibility of the combat sequences necessitates the guidance—however minimal—of our perception by the use of sound: the clashing, clangor and squelching of swords and bodies. The combat scenes are clear examples of the form of corporeal engagement Elsaesser describes: we are not moved by our *understanding* of the combat sequences; rather, we are moved by the sheer bodily response to the cuts and slashes of both the film's surface and its subjects. Such a bodily response is also heightened by the gory, bodily nature of the violence; it is a matter of swords and spears tearing the flesh rather than the dissociated hail of bullets one associates with "body count" action films (those of Schwarzenegger at the peak of his career, for example).

Can we now claim, then, that *Gladiator* is playing its part in bringing about the downfall of traditional Hollywood narrative precisely because of its use of spectacle, that it is a profound example of "New Hollywood" cinema? *Gladiator*'s use of spectacle is not of a clearly defined goodies-versus-baddies nature, but is rather of a radical, disjunctive and disconnective nature which institutes a mode of spectatorship that is close to the revolutionary style of Eisenstein (it may be interesting to compare these scenes with the storming of the Winter Palace in *October*, or the Battle on the Ice from *Alexander Nevsky*, for example) and far removed from the action-spectacles that Elsaesser so accurately describes as "the video game emplacement of 'shoot them, thrill them, chase them, thrill them.'"<sup>5</sup>

The aesthetic of engulfment, on the other hand, opens a doorway to a vision that enables political progress: its aesthetic of astonishment can be linked with Walter Benjamin's notions of the shock-effect, of that which allows the dreary and addled imagination of the work-a-day masses to be sparked into excitement and energy; if not the excitement and energy of the revolution, then at least perhaps the energised hope that change is in fact possible and even desirable.<sup>6</sup> And it could be argued that it is only as a result of spectacle that a political victory is secured in *Gladiator*: surely it is only by way of the combat sequences that victory over the tyranny of Commodus is achieved; it is precisely from within the logic of the spectacle—for Commodus eventually enters the Colosseum to fight Maximus—that the revolution is won and the freedom of Rome secured. Can we argue that *Gladiator* presents the thesis of "spectacle as revolution"?

Far from being a critique of Hollywood spectacle, we may be inclined to regard *Gladiator* as an affirmation of spectacle in the face of the tyranny of Hollywood narrative: no longer do we need to be held captive by the imaginary dream-worlds of Hollywood and its petty stories, its "tutor-code" of ideological mirages,<sup>7</sup> for *Gladiator* and its aesthetic of engulfment can allow us to throw off the shackles of (so-called) bourgeois ide-

ological representation in order that we may have a more direct engagement—a bodily, corporeal, or, in short, a "real" or "true" engagement—with the film world and with the cinematic apparatus itself. *Gladiator* may therefore be experienced as a truly "filmic" creation that stands against the reduction of the filmic to the realm of merely "telling stories". After all, cinema's vocation is not to tell stories (which is a property of myriad other art forms), but rather to display its own specific properties and potentialities.

Warren Buckland has outlined this characteristic aesthetic of contemporary film that has been championed by recent criticism: "[T]his aesthetic is created through an overemphasis on techniques such as saturated colours, strong backlighting, rapid editing or constant camera mobility, sound effects and special effects that directly assault the spectator's senses and nervous system. The result", Buckland tells us, "is that style in the New Hollywood film becomes self-sufficient and autonomous, rather than being subordinated to a film's themes and narrative."<sup>8</sup>

And yet, such statements certainly leave me feeling rather short-changed—as they do Buckland in his article. Buckland analyzes a film by one of the founding fathers of New Hollywood, Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. He describes a scene from the film in which the aesthetic of engulfment is paramount, where "the overall effect of [the] stylistic choices is indeed to foreground the action and assault the senses of the nervous system of the spectator".<sup>9</sup> However, Buckland points out that in addition to its aesthetic of engulfment, this spectacular action sequence also, and perhaps even more importantly, functions as a key transitional moment in the narrative of the film. Indeed, dividing the film into discrete episodes, Buckland shows that each episode culminates in an action sequence the outcome of which facilitates the entry into a new episode. In such terms, then, the function of spectacle is no longer one that opposes narrative, but rather, spectacle becomes an integral element in the unfolding of narrative.

Although its narrative structure, in contrast to *Raiders*, is not episodic, examining the combat sequences in *Gladiator* can nevertheless grant Buckland's claim further weight. The spectacular scenes do, in fact, give rise to important transitions in the narrative:

3 John Simon, "What, No Orgy?" *National Review*, (June 5, 2000), 59.

4 Thomas Elsaesser, "Specularity and Engulfment: Francis Ford Coppola and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*" in S. Neale and M. Smith (eds), *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, (London and New York: Routledge), 1998, 205.

5 Elsaesser, 204.

6 See Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator", *Art & Text*, Spring, 1989, 31-45; Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Shocken Books, 1969), 211-244.

7 Daniel Dayan, "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema" in Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods Volume I*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press), 438-451.

8 Warren Buckland, "A close encounter with *Raiders of the Lost Ark*: notes on narrative aspects of the New Hollywood blockbuster" in Neale and Smith (eds), *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, 170.

9 Buckland, 170.

a) *The battle between the Romans and the Germanians*. This battle is important because it is here that we are introduced to Maximus's greatness as a General, and it adds weight to the claims of hardship during the Romans' campaign, thus adding evidence for Maximus's desire to return home.

b) *Maximus escapes his executioners*. This is a brief scene, but it is obviously essential for the narrative; had Maximus been executed, the film would effectively have been over.

c) *Maximus's first fight as a gladiator in the Provinces*. This scene proves that Maximus is a formidable combatant, but it also proves that he will fight only when absolutely necessary (when it is a matter of life and death); he will not fight merely for the thrill of the kill.

d) *Another gladiatorial contest in the Provinces*. Here, Maximus proves that he has the potential to win the support of the crowd (they all chant his nickname, "Spaniard"). This point is an extremely important one for what follows in the narrative, and it is repeated immediately following the contest when Proximo speaks with Maximus about the necessity of "winning the crowd".

e) *The first gladiatorial contest in the Roman Colosseum*. This is a truly spectacular scene which was supposed to be a re-creation of the second War of Carthage. It therefore has the shape of a strategic battle in which Maximus once more assumes the role of General. Victorious, Maximus instantly becomes a crowd favourite. As the figure of the "leader" he impresses Commodus who then demands to meet him. This necessarily leads to Maximus's unmasking and the setting into play of the events of the second half of the film.

f) *Maximus fights against Tigris of Gaul* (a previously undefeated gladiator). Maximus wins, but declines to kill Tigris. This reinforces the point made in (c) above, whereby Maximus kills only when absolutely necessary. For showing such mercy the crowd loves him even more.

g) *Soldiers attack the gladiators' barracks*. This scene is a narrative mover; it serves to facilitate Maximus's attempted flight from Rome. But it also shows Proximo's willingness to stand against the Imperial forces, something he would never have done prior to meeting Maximus. This asserts a moral attitude that is important to the film, that "bad men can be redeemed". (Of course, only *some* bad men can be redeemed; Commodus, for example, cannot.)

h) *The contest between Maximus and Commodus*. This is the climax of the film and the eventual deaths of both participants is necessarily part of the film's story. Nonetheless, within the sequence there is also an important moment when Commodus's protectors refuse to hand him another sword, driving home the point that he did not have the will of the people.

It is important to realise that the spectacular sequences of *Gladiator*, while being thrilling, corporeal, disorienting and "engulfing", also provide important information for the narrative of the film. It is becoming more difficult to make a clear division between what is spectacle and what is narrative, between what resists or suspends narrative and that which contributes to narrative.

If we examine the structure of the film as a whole, we realise that it is a fine example of classical Hollywood cinema. Kristin Thompson has recently re-affirmed the narrative techniques of classical Hollywood by analysing those techniques in terms of recent Hollywood films. Thompson has affirmed a continuity between "classical" Hollywood and "new" Hollywood, and her argument is indeed convincing.<sup>10</sup> I will not go through the terms of Hollywood narrative technique in great detail—readers can gain such information from Thompson's book—though I will assert that *Gladiator* neatly fits the parameters of "clarity of comprehension", and that it follows a clear sequence of "causes and effects", that it has consistent, psychologically-based characters (e.g., Maximus is motivated by personal revenge and triumphs as a result of the "strength and honour" of his personality), that there is a clear goal established early in the film and that the film's ending more or less ties up all of the conflicts that had been present throughout the film.

In *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, Thompson fervently defends her thesis on the "large scale portions" of Hollywood films. The large scale portions are the main narrative divisions of a film—we might typically think of them as "acts" or "segments". The division between one narrative segment and another occurs when there is a significant change in the direction the narrative takes. Whereas many writers before her had insisted that Hollywood narratives can be divided into three main "acts", Thompson insists that there are typically four main narrative segments rather than three. These four large scale portions are: Setup, Complication, Development, and Climax. And *Gladiator* takes its place comfortably within this system, albeit with rather long setup and complication sections. These sections can be divided in the following manner:

Total Running Time: 149 mins

Setup: 44 mins (the change in narrative direction occurs after Maximus discovers his wife and son have been murdered)

Complication: 46 mins (change occurs when Maximus reveals his identity to Commodus in the Colosseum)

Development: 38 mins (change occurs when Maximus's escape from Rome is foiled)

Climax and Epilogue: 21 mins<sup>11</sup>

Thompson persuasively argues that "classical" as well as "new" Hollywood films appear to favour this kind of four act structuration and *Gladiator* presents a fine example of such a framework. For those who would point to a significant change

10 Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique*, (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1999).

11 My strategy here is nowhere near as rigorous or accurate as that provided by Thompson. For an indication of Thompson's methods see her "Appendix A: Large-Scale Portions of Classical Films" in *Storytelling*, 355-362. My times are based on the Australian VHS and DVD releases.





in Hollywood film practices, for those who would claim that "spectacle" or an aesthetic of "engulfment" or "action-attractions" has radically altered the status of so-called "post-classical" or "new" Hollywood films, *Gladiator* stands as a triumphant and exemplary refutation.

Indeed, *Gladiator* is perhaps even more significant for having taken the contemporary fascination with spectacle to another level. If our fascination with *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, 1991), *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) and *Twister* (Jan de Bont, 1996), among many others throughout the 1990s, was to a large degree determined by our desire to see the display of cinematic technology (the "wow" factor that has placed contemporary audiences alongside the audiences of early cinema for some writers), that is, with a desire for spectacle, then *Gladiator* creates a curious impasse. For *Gladiator*, the spectacle no longer wishes to draw attention to itself, the screen is no longer proudly proclaiming to the audience "look what I can do!" Rather, such "exhibitionism" is absent from *Gladiator*. Now, the spectacle and its special effects have merged with and become indistinguishable from the remainder of the mise-en-scène. Again I will refer to a Spielberg film to demonstrate this difference.

When we first see the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* we are baited and teased and lured by the camera into believing there is

something truly astounding—spectacular—being hidden from our view. The camera lingers on the amazed expressions of the scientists as they peer off-screen to objects that have rendered them speechless and dumbfounded. It is as though the screen is announcing to the audience (in that inimitable way that Spielberg has mastered): "You-are-about-to-witness-something-truly-spectacular." And indeed we do: when the dinosaurs are unveiled for our view in the following shots we marvel not merely at the spectacle of the dinosaurs roaming among the film's human characters, but also at the spectacular processes of the cinema and its technological magic that have granted us the opportunity for this flight of fancy.

Compared with this, *Gladiator* is remarkably understated. A "You-are-about-to-witness-something-truly-spectacular" moment also occurs—when the gladiators first lay eyes upon the Colosseum. During this sequence we are invited to wonder what the gladiators, who have never been to Rome before, are looking at; Juba, for example, states, "I did not know man could build such things." But when the facade of the massive amphitheatre is eventually shown to us, it is downplayed as if to say, "Yes, we can accurately reproduce the grand nature of Colosseum, but we don't want to draw attention to this. We're not going to shamelessly flaunt our expertise and technological prowess merely for the sake of a few short-lived thrills." In

contrast to the scenes from *Jurassic Park*, these moments in *Gladiator* confirm a sense that the film wants the audience to "keep its eyes on the story", that it does not want its spectacular effects to "stand out" from the rest of the drama, but wants them to be smoothly and seamlessly integrated into the narrative.

Can we thus leave spectacle behind? Can we finally and ultimately declare that "spectacle" in *Gladiator* is very much a secondary consideration and that narrative wins the day? Can we now be certain that *Gladiator's* popularity and success are due to its adoption of classical Hollywood techniques of storytelling?

I indicated earlier that there were (at least) two plots in *Gladiator*: the main plot line which centres on the personal story of Maximus's quest against Commodus, while another is concerned with the political status of the Roman Empire and the activities of the Roman Senate, with the question of whether Rome will ever again become a Republic. There is, however, also a third plot, a plot that seems, I admit, rather amiss and contrived. I am speaking of what is perhaps a rather minor narrative line involving Commodus's love for his sister, Lucilla, and its associated "family romance" consequences. Commodus did, after all, murder his father (like Oedipus), and with this deed the door was opened not only to his becoming the Emperor of Rome (as did Oedipus become ruler of Thebes), but also to his potentially securing the love of Lucilla (a Jocasta-substitute, to continue the analogy). Furthermore, there is the issue of a past romance between Maximus and Lucilla and the indication that they may still love one another—or certainly that Lucilla may still love Maximus—hence one may even argue that the conflict between Maximus and Commodus contains its own Oedipal structure.

However, I am rather less interested in the allegorical significance of Commodus's familial desire than I am concerned with analysing the role of this sub-plot within the compositional and narrative structure of the film. What is the relationship of this plot to the other narrative strands of the film—the "dominant" plot of Maximus's revenge, and the other minor "political" plot concerning the re-establishment of the Roman republic?

When all is said and done, the Commodus-Lucilla family romance plot is designed to accentuate Commodus's evil nature. It is probably accurate to call it a "negative" plot, for this is the part of the narrative which we hope doesn't work out, we hope it is negated, as indeed it is. The other parts of the narrative I have mentioned would therefore be "positive": we hope that Maximus does succeed in his quest for revenge and that Rome therefore becomes a republic again. We associate Maximus with his much vaunted "strength and honour", his familial loyalty (he does not succumb to Lucilla's advances), his mercy and his humane virtues. On the other hand, we associate Commodus with decidedly "weak" virtues (as Commodus outlines to Marcus Aurelius near the beginning of the film, his virtuous traits are ambition, resourcefulness, courage, devotion, none of which Aurelius believes to be among the chief virtues), with familial treach-

ery (he murders his father and desires his sister), with blood-lust (he enjoys the sports of killing) and tyranny. And it stands to reason that part of the film's ideological message may be that all tyrannous leaders are in some way or other perverted, while those who cling to a faith in democracy are pure hearted and true.

The terms of the film and its narrative that I have been discussing can be divided into a range of oppositions:

COMMODUS	MAXIMUS
negative	positive
tyranny	democracy
incest	family values
ruthlessness	mercy
spectacle	narrative
horrible death	beautiful death

These divisions illustrate the ways in which *Gladiator* clearly plays out its drama of good versus evil, of democracy against tyranny, of the family opposed to bestial desires, of mercy and fairness against treachery and ruthlessness, and of the positive power of narrative against the negative effects of spectacle.

I have indicated in the table above what is a final dimension of this division between good and evil: the nature of death. Following the outcome of their final combat, the body of Commodus is left to wither and rot on the ground of the Colosseum, no-one sheds a tear for his death, no-one embraces him as a beloved master or dearly departed leader. Instead, all attention is paid to the body of Maximus as he is triumphantly carried from the Colosseum on the shoulders of the guards who had previously been loyal to Commodus. In short, Maximus is graced with what the Greeks referred to as a "beautiful death", while Commodus suffers the indignity of being written out of all honour, of being denied all of the history and memory that accompanies glory, so that he is left behind to endure what can only be described as a thoroughly ignoble death.<sup>12</sup> This is important because by ignoring the mutilated corpse of the disgraced villain, there is an attempt to erase him from memory; in effect, Commodus is assigned a fate that is worse than ordinary mortality, a mortality that would at least include the rites of funeral and burial. It is fair to say that Commodus suffers the kind of fate that Marcus Aurelius (the "real" Aurelius in his *Meditations*) reserved for death, but without Aurelius's consolation of living virtuously, and certainly without the desired mode of "inner detachment" for which Aurelius strives.

It is Maximus, on the other hand, who personifies the kind of detachment and virtue prescribed by the *Meditations*, and yet he faces a death that is far in excess of the bland and all too human insignificance of life's passing pondered by the philosopher-Emperor. Maximus's death brings to an end a

12 See Jean-Pierre Vernant, "A 'Beautiful Death' and the Disfigured Corpse in Homeric Epic" in *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*, edited by F.I. Zeitlan, Princeton, (Princeton University Press, 1991, 50-74).

13 Claude Lefort, "The Image of the Body and Totalitarianism", in *The Political Forms of Modern Society*, London, (Polity Press, 1981, 203).



journey that had been prefigured in the film's opening scene and alluded to many times throughout the film. His death sees him delivered into an Arcadian promised land where he is re-united with his wife and son. His "beautiful death" ensures that his deeds and fame will live in the memory of the people of Rome who, we must presume, will reclaim Rome as a Republic (once again confirming that Hollywood has never let the truth get in the way of a good story).

We should not underestimate the significance of these moves that the film makes, for it places before us none other than the story of our own democracy, of our modern representation of the political. The Kingdoms and Empires that preceded modern democracy (and many of them are still with us) were (are) based, according to Claude Lefort's analysis, on the notion of a society that "represented its unity and its identity to itself as that of a body—a body which found its figuration in the body of the king..<sup>13</sup> A people gained its conception of itself by way of its identification with the King, or in the case of *Gladiator*, by way of identification with the Emperor of Rome. The change occurs in modern democracies when the

place and role of the king is left "empty", when the body of the king is no longer granted the substance that imbues it with power; when the body of the King becomes, as it were, a "mutilated corpse", like that of Commodus. The place of supreme power previously occupied by the King-Emperor is now occupied by no-one; it is a place that can be filled definitively by no-one, insofar as, with democracy, the place of power becomes a "no place"—precisely like the Arcadian *utopia* to which Maximus's dead body is transported. The question of who or what represents this "no place" of power—a place that was previously and unquestionably occupied by the King-Emperor—is, in democracy, deemed uncertain, as something decided only on an impermanent basis, as a result of elections, for example.<sup>14</sup>

In short, democracy must continually tell, re-tell and remake its own stories; its historical form is that of narrative, of mediation, of stories told by others from the past and for the future (a "democracy to come").<sup>15</sup> This is why Lefort will claim that "This society is the *historical* society *par excellence*."<sup>16</sup> Democracy is also a mode of representation; that is

why we refer to "representative democracy"—a fact which all postmodern critiques of representation may have overlooked—though democracy provides a mode of history and representation that is markedly different from that of kingly representation. Democracy does not lay claim to any immediate relation to power, but derives its power only insofar as it is mediated by "representatives" (i.e., members of parliament). Against this, as Louis Marin made clear in his exhaustive analysis of *"The Portrait of the King"*, during that age which preceded democracy, the telling of a nation's (the *ancien régime*'s) story was exercised in such a way as to ensure the erasure of its quality as a story, to cover the traces of its emergence as narrative, so that rather than being perceived as narrative, history was instead raised to the level of the *icon*: the picture, the spectacle, "the fiction of presence".<sup>17</sup> Can it be stated that contemporary cinema's penchant for spectacle—its "fiction of presence" or its tendency toward "engulfment"—is reverting to the very same process that Marin describes, an *ancien régime* of spectacle built upon the process of what Marin calls "narrative's negation"?<sup>18</sup>

And so we return to spectacle. There is perhaps one other significant moment of the spectacular in *Gladiator*. When Commodus returns as the victorious and newly crowned Roman emperor following the battles against the Germanians, there are several shots featuring him and his entourage being greeted by cheering crowds. When he eventually reaches the Roman forum, the mise-en-scène clearly and deliberately recalls the famous sequence when Hitler walks between massed columns of S.A. men in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935). Commodus, therefore, is directly linked with Hitler.

Steve Neale has observed of *Triumph of the Will* that its beauty or fascination with audiences—in contrast to its status as a Nazi propaganda film—was purely and simply a result of its composition of *spectacle*. The film's troubling beauty, its cinematic or artistic power was, according to Neale, the product of a carefully conceived strategy of spectacle, a deliberate dazzling of the eye that was not based on careful observation, not based on "the visible as guarantee of *veracity* (of truth, of reality)", but which was based, rather, on the creation of spectacle as a "mask" or "lure".<sup>19</sup> The link between *Gladiator* and *Triumph of the Will* is therefore a telling one: the choreographed spectacle of Nazism is transferred onto the supreme spectacle of a triumphant emperor, and spectacle itself is conveyed as an integral part of totalitarian power.

However, while *Triumph of the Will* offers only the repetitive lure of spectacle in the manner of a bounteous or splendid brainwashing, of seduction and surrender to the orchestrations of the almighty Führer, *Gladiator* offers a counter-strategy. *Gladiator* provides the spectacular in abundance, but if the link between spectacle and totalitarianism is made (a connection that the film explicitly makes) and by extension, if a link between spectacle and Hollywood is also made (a connection that we can say is made, at best, unconsciously) then *Gladiator* also offers the possibility of going beyond the repressive lure of such spectacles. That it provides an answer or solution to such a "problem" of spectacle is clearly not the case; the film undeniably delights in its own spectacular produc-

tions. But it nonetheless provides a position from which audiences can criticise this use of spectacle. In this way the film qualifies as a reflexive one: it places in question its own representational strategies. As Leslie Felperin has pointed out, the film does offer ample "dollops of exquisitely choreographed violence", but it is also "nonetheless implicitly critical" of these spectacular displays.<sup>20</sup>

*Gladiator* may not go so far as to offer a *critique* of spectacle, but it does place spectacle in question. The film certainly provides scenes of spectacular engulfment, but it also adheres very closely to the tenets of traditional Hollywood storytelling. This is the film's great virtue: it tempts us with the spectacular, but it also asks us to see that the spectacular is always linked in some way to a narrative or a history; that the spectacular must be considered from within the framework of wider discourses. The film equates spectacular dazzlement with repressive power structures, with a totalitarianism or imperialism that is political as well as cultural. Even though I would hesitate to declare that classical Hollywood narrative techniques would offer a way out of the repressive representations of Hollywood spectacle, I would certainly argue that they offer a better starting point than does a blunt renunciation of classical storytelling techniques and an out and out embrace of spectacle.

And this is ultimately the question *Gladiator* asks: "Yes, the cinema can produce spectacular effects, but is that what we want the cinema to do?" Contemporary film studies' desire to find alternative narratives or alternatives to narrative in Hollywood cinema (or in any other style of cinema for that matter) should be wary that any perceived deviation from classical Hollywood narrative may, on the one hand, not at all be a deviation from the principles of classical narrative (as Kristin Thompson's book so clearly demonstrates), while, on the other hand, such deviations from classical narrative may not be the stuff of which dreams of a postmodern radical freedom are realised. Freedom from the constraints of classical narrative does not add up to freedom per se.

I am grateful for the helpful suggestions made by Brin Grenyer, Jane Stadler and David Musgrave on early drafts of this paper.

14 See the analysis of Slavoj Zizek in *For they know not what they do: Enjoyment as a political factor*, (London: Verso, 1991), 229-277.

15 Jacques Derrida theorises democracy in terms of a "democracy to come" in "Call it a Day for Democracy", *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

16 Lefort, 205.

17 Louis Marin, *The Portrait of the King*, trans. M. M. Houle, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 87.

18 Marin, 87.

19 Steve Neale, "Triumph of the Will: Notes on Documentary and Spectacle", *Screen* 20:1, (1978), 85.

20 Leslie Felperin, "Decline and Brawl", *Sight and Sound*, vol. 10:6, (June 2000), 34.

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# THEY KILL FOR LOVE

## Defining the Erotic Thriller as a Film Genre

Within the last decade or so, a number of films have appeared in which desire and death interpenetrate, as is often indicated by two-word titles linking a sexy adjective with a deadly noun, or vice versa: *Bodily Harm*, *Carnal Crimes*, *Dangerous Indiscretion*, *Mortal Passions*, *Obsessive Love*, *Sexual Malice*, and so on. These films' taglines, used for newspaper ads, movie posters, film trailers, and video boxes, also tell the same story of potentially lethal love: "Sex. Greed. Power. Murder;" "Flesh seduces. Passion kills;" "In the heat of desire love can turn to deception;" "There's a fine line between passion and pain;" and, with connect-the-dots explicitness, "Red hot passion. Cold-blooded murder. One things leads to another." When these kinds of films first started appearing in the late eighties, they were often dismissed by critics as mere imitations designed to cash in on the surprising success of *Fatal Attraction* (1987). But it soon became clear that something more important was happening, as the number of low-budget films of this type began to grow exponentially, and as Hollywood began to produce a series of A-list films in this category, many featuring major stars: *Sea of Love* (1989; Al Pacino, Ellen Barkin), *Consenting Adults* (1992; Kevin Kline, Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio), *Final Analysis* (1992; Richard Gere, Kim Basinger), *Body of Evidence* (1993; Madonna, Willem Dafoe), *Color of Night* (1994; Bruce Willis), and *Never Talk to Strangers* (1995; Rebecca DeMornay, Antonio Banderas). If *Fatal Attraction* started the trend, the even-more-controversial *Basic Instinct* (1992) solidified it, and the fact that Carl Reiner named his spoof *Fatal Instinct* (1993) after these films is strong indication that a new genre exists and that these two films can be taken as paradigmatic of it. Another sign that these kinds of films have achieved genre status is that Stanley Kubrick, who with each film seemed to put his imprimatur on a different genre, released in 1999 a film that, whatever its actual type, was at least marketed as an erotic thriller—*Eyes Wide Shut*, starring Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman. Finally, unlike the term "film noir," which was not used by makers or marketers of the forties' and fifties' films to which French critics later attached the label, "erotic thriller" has been in widespread use by directors, audiences, and reviewers since the early nineties. If it is a marketing gimmick exploited by advertisers, it is also a generally recognized new category for films.<sup>1</sup>

The word "new," of course, is relative. The genre didn't spring from nowhere, and one can see its roots and affiliations in the categories critics used for these films in the late eighties before "erotic thriller" became common parlance: film noir, mystery, horror, melodrama, and pornography. A hybrid form (as even its title indicates), the erotic thriller combines traditional generic elements into a new mix. If it owes much to previous genres (sometimes to the point of being mistaken for them), it also presents an innovative conjunction of prior generic strands in a form that is specific to contemporary

<sup>1</sup> Some video stores even have a separate section for "erotic thrillers."

by **Douglas Keesey**



*Basic Instinct*

social issues. As the erotic thriller extends generic lines in new directions and intertwines formerly separate strands, it does so in response to changing social concerns. Generic transformation and social change are interrelated, and the birth of a new genre from older forms is a social-historical event as much as it is a moment in film-aesthetic history. In this essay, I shall consider the form and ideology of the erotic thriller in relation to those of pornography, mystery, and horror, leaving discussion of the links to melodrama and film noir for another time.

### Pornography

The erotic thriller's strong link to pornography is certainly one reason for its popular success—and probably one reason for its critical neglect as a genre. Porn is usually decried by mainstream reviewers and, until recently, by film scholars, who have traditionally seen their role as attempting to elevate the popular taste above base pleasures. Hollywood films and pornography have actually been on converging paths for several decades, as Hollywood made its love scenes steamier and steamier, first to differentiate its product from TV's tameness (the fifties and sixties), then to challenge the competition provided by porn films like *Deep Throat* (the seventies), and finally to combat the new popularity of cable and video porn (the eighties and nineties). The appearance of the erotic thriller as a genre is concurrent with that of video porn, and the two are closely related: both genres feature sex scenes occurring at regular intervals, and in low-budget erotic thrillers the plot, as in porn, may be mainly a pretext for the sex. As Linda Ruth Williams notes, erotic thrillers "operate with a constant awareness of masturbation as a prime audience response and index of the film's success,"<sup>2</sup> particularly when viewed on home video. Viewers' interest in seeing ever-more explicit sex can be variously explained as the logical consequence of Hollywood's always upping the ante, creating and feeding an appetite for greater sensationalism; as a reaction against the Reagan-Bush era's conservative propaganda promoting "family values"; or as a visual compensation for a reduction in casual or promiscuous sex due to the threat of AIDS.

It should be noted, however, that erotic thrillers also define themselves by the distance they keep from porn. While low-budget, direct-to-video, unrated erotic thrillers are virtually synonymous with porn, Hollywood's A-list thrillers are rated R and play in respectable theaters. When these go to video, they are usually still rentable in the R-rated version, as well as in unrated or "director's cut" versions for sex aficionados. Granted, R-rated erotic thrillers could be described as Hollywood's compromise between the censor's demand for public respectability and the consumer's desire for sexual adventure, and bourgeois patrons could be said to attend such thrillers as an alibi for their interest in pornography. But there is more to the difference between erotic thrillers and porn: the line these thrillers walk between soft- and hardcore sex scenes is an important part of the thrill drawing audiences to see them.

The exposure of the body in an erotic thriller, though expected, is not routine, as in pornography; instead, it always involves the transgression of limits. Whether this transgression is to be read as ideologically progressive or reactionary is a point as crucial as it is contestable. Consider the notorious "beaver shot"

from *Basic Instinct*, in which Catherine/Sharon Stone crosses and uncrosses her legs, exposing herself to police officers during an interrogation. As the camera positions us to share the policemen's investigative gaze up Catherine's dress, we participate in the violation of her private parts—a sexist thrill. But is this scene one of eye-rape, or does Catherine use exhibitionism as a counterattack against the men invading her privacy by interrogating her? Robert Battistini refers to her "thoroughly unashamed and purposeful revelation of her (now menacing) vulva,"<sup>3</sup> and Robert E. Wood notes that her "conspicuous absence of undergarments disconcerts a battery of police interrogators: they and not the suspect are made to sweat. More significantly, they become the object of the gaze as camera and audience are aligned with Catherine to consider the interrogators as objects of aggression."<sup>4</sup> Thus their fear of female sexuality is turned back upon the men, as Catherine deliberately displays herself as the castrating sight/site of their dread.<sup>5</sup> But, on another level (as many viewers now know), the display was not deliberate: as Sharon Stone has indicated in numerous interviews, director Paul Verhoeven had sworn to her prior to the shooting of this scene that her pubic hair would not be visible on camera. Yet, in violation of her wishes, it was—and still is, in freeze-framed videos and video scans exhibited on the World Wide Web. Whether the scene is viewed as a male sexist fantasy or a feminist critique ultimately depends on the viewer's predisposition. The scene itself, like so many in erotic thrillers, is open to widely divergent ideological readings, as Hollywood continues its lucrative practice of appealing to the broadest possible audience.

It is probably because of the ideological ambiguity of such scenes that Stone, a feminist who made her fame as an actress in *Basic Instinct*, has said that "in this business there is plan A, in which you become successful by living and acting with a lot of integrity. Then there's plan B, where you sell your soul to the devil. I still find it hard to distinguish one from the other."<sup>6</sup> Another actress, Chloe Channing, while auditioning for a part in an erotic thriller—increasingly, one of the few kinds of roles available to aspiring young actresses—was reminded of Sharon Stone: "after slogging through a series of dull, undistinguished roles in a series of dull, undistinguished movies, Stone had been catapulted by *Basic Instinct* into movie-star heaven. Now she was thought of as the fuck of the century. Suddenly, I felt depressed; I longed for the days when women like Katharine Hepburn became big stars because of their wit, their intelligence, their comedic timing, and their guts."<sup>7</sup> Instructed by the director to find some novel (sexual) way to "offend" him (expose herself?), Channing says, "I found myself overwhelmed with rage. The audition had seemed so unfair, so demeaning, so . . . so . . . *offensive!*"<sup>8</sup>

Whatever the meaning of the "beaver shot" scene in *Basic Instinct*, it is worth noting that Stone's co-star, Michael Douglas, who appears with her in several sex scenes, had a "clause in [his] contract specifying that his penis could never be shown on screen."<sup>9</sup> The erotic thriller's transgression of limits involves only the female body, not the male. The penis is not exposed but remains veiled, the better to preserve its myth of phallic power. Even though Phillip Noyce, the director of Stone's next erotic thriller, *Sliver* (1993), vowed that "it wouldn't be another

film on a long list of movies that exploited the female image," noting "how prominently [co-star William] Baldwin's penis would be featured,"<sup>10</sup> nevertheless, shots of the male organ were removed in order to achieve an R rating, whereas Stone is watched by Baldwin through a hidden video camera while she masturbates in the bath. Her feminist challenge to his male voyeurism at the movie's end—she tells him to "get a life!"—is probably too little and too late to offset the sexist gaze he and we have indulged in throughout the film—but at least the challenge is posed.

Thus, the viewer of an erotic thriller may initially be positioned as porn's prototypical voyeur, masturbating in his mastery over the female body, but, unlike in porn, this dominance is usually challenged, either weakly (as in Stone's verbal retort to Baldwin) or more strongly (as in her aggressive exhibitionism directed at her interrogators in *Basic Instinct*). Similarly, whereas porn presents heterosexual intercourse as the male conquest of women, erotic thrillers question this attitude and outcome. The sex scenes in both genres move through the usual stages of foreplay, but while the porn narrative culminates in the "cum shot"—visible proof of virility—the erotic thriller takes the man through kissing, fondling, fellatio, and fucking only to climax in his murder (or the threat thereof). In *Body of Evidence*, Madonna is accused of having fucked an older man to death; a character describes her body as "no different from a gun or a knife." In *Fatal Attraction*, the rough sex by which Dan/Michael Douglas proves his masculinity with Alex/Glenn Close is later restaged with "the same kitchen setting, the same intertwining choreography, even the same panting soundtrack" as Alex attacks him with a knife. As James Conlon notes, the point of the likeness is that "Passion leads inevitably to murder; it cannot be extricated from death."<sup>11</sup> And *Basic Instinct* begins with a sex scene that climaxes in the man's death by ice pick ("He got off before he got offed"); the two subsequent scenes of intercourse between Nick/Michael Douglas and Catherine/Sharon Stone are staged in exactly the same way, with Nick fearing the same outcome.

It is as if the pornographic fantasy of conquering women were haunted by guilt over the fact that such dominance amounts to rape and deserves rape in return—the woman's penetration of the man by gun bullets, knife, or ice pick. (Interestingly, Nick's partner [Gus/George Dzundza] speculates that Nick is fucking Catherine because he wants to die due to guilt over his having shot some innocent bystanders in an earlier scene: does Nick's death wish represent his unconscious realization that his macho gunplay—and cocksmanship—must come to an end? His nickname is "Shooter".) In *Fatal Attraction*, Alex's coming at Dan with a knife could be seen as Dan's nightmare of punishment for having abandoned her after using her for his own pleasure and making her pregnant ("You thought you could just walk into my life and turn it upside-down without a thought for anyone but yourself"; "I won't allow you to treat me like some slut you can just bang a couple of times and throw in the garbage."). The phallic women of these erotic thrillers may be a sign that the feminist critique of porn is taking hold of the patriarchal fantasy apparatus. Rather than lying back and taking it, women are fighting back in erotic thrillers, wielding the male weapon against

men in the very heart of the masculine imaginary.

Certainly, feminist viewers—male and female—have expressed admiration for the phallic women in erotic thrillers, but a case could be made for their fitting the old sexist stereotype of the castrating bitch whom it's a thrill to ride and survive. As Lynda Hart puts it, "If men need femininity to be associated with death, they also need representations in which masculinity survives the thrill of getting close to those flames."<sup>12</sup> To Nick, Catherine is "the fuck of the century" because she makes him afraid he will die beyond the little death of orgasm: "That's what made it so good." For women to be considered the equivalent of autoerotic self-strangulation is hardly flattering. The bondage and discipline exercised by women on men in erotic thrillers goes beyond porn's kinky excitements to reach a whole new level of potentially lethal thrills, as parodied in *Fatal Instinct's* "Kamikaze Kama Sutra—Encyclopedia of Dangerous Sexual Positions." Erotic thrillers depict male masochistic fantasies in which gender role reversals are taken as far as they can go: in *Basic Instinct*, the sexual scenario puts woman on top, man tied to the bed by her scarf and—unless he wins her over in time—penetrated with her ice pick. At the end of the film, Catherine, who has reached for the ice pick, embraces Nick instead. In *Fatal Attraction's* struggle over the knife, Dan disarms Alex, not winning her over but winning out over her. An unpleasantly familiar element of Oedipal rivalry enters these films wherein the male protagonist proves that, unlike the (often older) men who have died trying, *he can fuck without being fucked*—as Willem Dafoe attempts to survive his trysts with Madonna's murderous *Body of Evidence*, and as Nick escapes the ice-picked fate of the man in *Basic Instinct's* opening scene.<sup>13</sup>

2 Linda Ruth Williams, "Erotic Thrillers and Rude Women," *Sight and Sound* 3.7 (July 1993), 12.

3 Robert Battistini, "*Basic Instinct*: Revisionist Hard-On, Hollywood Trash, or Feminist Hope?" *Cinefocus* 2.2 (Spring 1992), 39.

4 Robert E. Wood, "Somebody Has to Die: *Basic Instinct* as White Noir," *Post Script* 12.3 (Summer 1993), 47.

5 Like pornography, the erotic thriller reduces the female body to sexual parts. However, as in the "beaver shot" from *Basic Instinct*, these parts are often more castrating than welcoming, unlike the wide-open women of porn. In the erotic thriller, the vagina's ability to "stare back" at the phallic eye gives this genre more feminist potential than is usually offered by porn's passive, appropriate female body.

6 Sharon Stone, qtd. in John Walker, ed., *Halliwell's Filmgoer's and Video Viewer's Companion*, 11th ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 574.

7 Chloe Channing, "Offensive Behavior," *Buzz* (July-Aug. 1992), 38.

8 Channing, 91.

9 Amy Taubin, "The Boys Who Cried Misogyny," *Village Voice* (28 April 1992), 36.

10 Spy (June 1993), 34.

11 James Conlon, "The Place of Passion: Reflections on *Fatal Attraction*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 16.4 (Winter 1989), 153.

12 Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 133.

13 Paul Verhoeven's *The Fourth Man* (Dutch, 1984) makes unusually explicit what is often only hinted at in Hollywood's erotic thrillers: the male protagonist braves the woman's deadly desire as a way of gaining a leg up on homosocial power relations. The writer in this film exposes himself to the sexual threat posed by the woman only so that he can remain in the company of her boyfriend. Nickolas Pappas makes a similar argument about the man (Al Pacino), the woman (Ellen Barkin), and her ex-husband (Michael Rooker) in *Sea of Love* (1989). See Pappas, "Failures of Marriage in *Sea of Love* (The Love of Men, the Respect of Women)," in Cynthia A. Freeland and Thomas E. Wartenberg, eds., *Philosophy and Film* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 109-25.



Fatal Attraction

A final difference-within-similarity between porn and erotic thrillers can be found in their depictions of "lesbian love scenes". Both genres present sex between women. In porn, such scenes are clearly mastur-minded by the male voyeur and are not about female agency; the women perform for his pleasure, not their own. By their seeming self-sufficiency exclusive of the male, they challenge him to enter the scene and prove that only a man will do—and he may even imagine doing them both, in a *ménage à trois*. In *Basic Instinct*, the sensual dance between Catherine and her girlfriend Roxy seems offered as foreplay to Nick, who later feels that he has successfully taken Roxy's place in bed with Catherine. As Yvonne Tasker notes, Nick seems to believe that he has "cured" [Catherine] of her lesbianism, . . . as he brags about his sexual performance to Catherine's girlfriend.<sup>14</sup> But, in the erotic thriller, male prowess in bed does not simply displace some "naturally inferior" lesbianism: Roxy's desire for Catherine is serious and determined—she tries to run Nick over with a car before crashing—and Catherine cries real tears at her death (she was dry-eyed at the demise of her *male* lover). Even as Nick may feel his manhood solidified by Catherine's choosing to embrace his sex at the end, she did reach for that ice pick, which remains—in the film's last shot—under her bed.

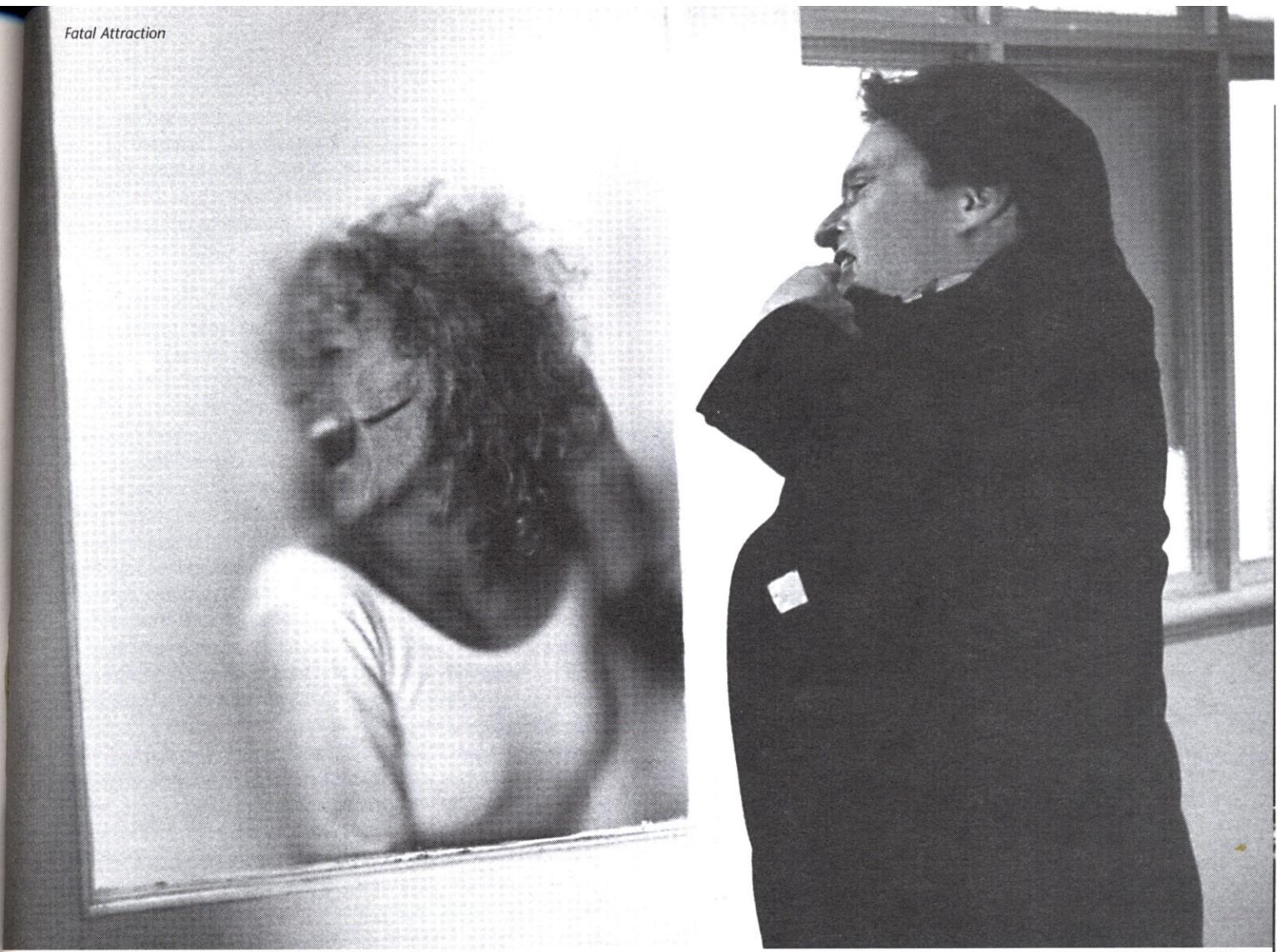
Once again, the erotic thriller suggests disturbances in porn's

masculinist imaginary. The effect of lesbian activism and Queer Nation during the eighties and nineties has been to make female-female desire and bisexuality harder for men to dismiss as mere stages on the road to heterosexuality. The idea that a woman might choose a woman or choose not to choose—the idea that a woman has a choice and the agency to make it—is both enticing (surely this is part of Catherine's appeal for Nick) and frightening, for it means an end to the male fantasy of total control. As a projection of male fears, the women in *Basic Instinct* are demonized in the way that lesbians often are, depicted as autoerotic-narcissistic "mirrors" of one another (they're all icy blondes indifferent to men), as "mothers" to each other (they ignore the man-boy so desperate for attention), and as "men" (anyone with agency, desire for women, and an ice pick must "really" be a man).<sup>15</sup> Near the end of the film, thinking that his own former girlfriend Beth has slept with Catherine and is about to pull a gun out of her pocket, Nick shoots her after having said, "Still like girls, Beth?" The phallic women Beth and Roxy must be destroyed so that Catherine can take her rightful place at Nick's side (like Eve made from Adam's rib).

### Mystery

If porn can be said to involve an investigation into female sexuality in which woman is eventually pinned down as the opposite sex, and if mysteries involve murder investigations wherein disguises are penetrated and the killer's weakness exposed, then the erotic thriller can be said to combine the two genres: in a telling double entendre, Nick says his goal is to "nail" whichever blonde has been wielding the ice pick. Whether he shoots her with his gun (Beth) or his penis (Catherine), Nick's aim is to disarm the phallic woman and reform her as the hole or lack complementing his potency. However, whereas the private eye or dick in a mystery makes confident use of his superior knowledge to identify and eliminate the culprit and restore the patriarchal order, the male protagonist in an erotic thriller rarely reaches such an omniscient or omnipotent conclusion. After killing his girlfriend Beth in the certain conviction that she is the killer, Nick beds Catherine, but we see an ice pick under her bed. Did Beth put it there to frame Catherine, or was it Catherine who had earlier framed Beth? On the "director's cut" video of *Basic Instinct*, Verhoeven seems conclusive in his statement that the end of the film reveals the solution to the mystery: Catherine did it. But then he instills doubt by pointing out that the ice pick under Catherine's bed is a steel one she had used earlier in the film to break ice, whereas the pick we have seen the killer use to murder men was made of wood. Rather than consummating his phallic mastery over Catherine, Nick is left in a state of macho-narcissistic ignorance: he thinks he has nailed her, but she could potentially reach for that ice pick at any time and nail *him*.

Judging *Basic Instinct* by the standards of a good mystery, Richard Schickel complains that it does not measure up because it breaks "faith with the most inviolate convention of the whodunit—refusing to state firmly which of the two women dunit."<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Roger Ebert objects to the film's departure from the sound structural principles of a mystery, whereby red herrings are eventually realized as such and the hero's (and audi-



ence's) detective work narrows down the clues to point to the one inevitably guilty party: "What bothers me is that the whole plot has been constructed so that every relevant clue can be read two ways. That means the solution, when it is finally revealed, is not necessarily true."<sup>17</sup> Yet erotic thrillers are not failed mysteries, but a different—though related—genre. It is interesting that Verhoeven describes *Basic Instinct* as "a sadomasochistic murder mystery", implying not only that Nick gets a sexual charge out of his power struggle with the women (does he enjoy being a masochist up to a point? the point of death?), but also that the question of who ends up dominant and who submissive may be a bit more confused than in the traditional mystery, where the detective rarely has sex—let alone S/M sex—with the suspect.<sup>18</sup>

The confused endings of erotic thrillers reflect and intervene in ideological conflicts pertaining to today's social issues, which have changed from those of the past. It is Nick's statement (borrowed from another male cop) about wanting to "fuck like minks, raise rug rats, and live happily ever after" that prompts Catherine to reach for the ice pick under the bed, and it is his willingness to accept her wish not to have children that leads her to leave the ice pick there and embrace him. Does the movie here promote through Nick some recent male understanding

that not every woman wants to be a mother and that some women might well get angry at the assumption that they do, or is Catherine's potentially murderous aversion to children a sign of dysfunction (she's too sexually active, too mannish, too lesbian)? Is her not wanting children really just Nick's fantasy of sex without any strings attached, or is this a progressive ideal shared by both men and women, as when Catherine earlier claims the same right as men to enjoy sex without love or emotional attachment? If sadomasochistic sex is the erotic thriller's exploration of gender role reversal and deconstruction of opposites, then the film's ambiguous ending figures the male's continuing ambivalence regarding what a woman wants and what he wants in a woman.

As to the irresolution about whodunit, this can certainly be taken in the reactionary sense as a sign of male fears run ram-

14 Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 140.

15 Chris Holmlund, "Cruisin' for a Bruisin': Hollywood's Deadly (Lesbian) Dolls," *Cinema Journal* 34.1 (Fall 1994), 36-37.

16 Richard Schickel, "Lots of Skin, but No Heart," *Time* (23 March 1992), 65.

17 Roger Ebert, *Roger Ebert's Video Companion*, 1994 ed. (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1993), 54.

18 Paul Verhoeven, qtd. in Nicholas Pasquariello, "Primal Urges Propel *Basic Instinct*," *American Cinematographer* 73.4 (April 1992), 44.



pant. The fact that any of the icy blondes in the film could have committed the murders goes beyond the mystery genre's requirement that there be the greatest possible number of suspects, because none is really ruled out in the end. Instead, since any one of the women could be guilty (and several have confessed to having murdered before), and since they all seem to know each other intimately, the implication is that they may have "done it" together: had lesbian sex, murdered men—it amounts to the same thing, from a paranoid male perspective. Thus the film's inconclusiveness could be said to figure a pervasive lesbiphobia. Chris Fowler, executive director of GLAAD Los Angeles, argued that *Basic Instinct* is "based on a stereotype that lesbians hate men. The fact they are lesbians defines their hatred of men, which then lends itself to their murdering of men. This is, in fact, defamatory."<sup>19</sup> Gay activists protested at theaters showing the film, where they "blew whistles, passed out leaflets, and carried such placards as 'Kiss My Ice Pick,' 'Hollywood Promotes Anti-Gay Violence,' and 'Save Your Money—The Bisexual Did It.'"<sup>20</sup> The "Catherine Did It!" campaign to spoil the mystery by revealing the ending of the film represents an attempt to challenge audience indoctrination by the mystery formula into unthinking hatred of bisexuality or lesbianism as

guilty *per se*: "If the viewer knows what the ending is, the manipulation of the viewer is eliminated," as Phyllis Burke rather optimistically put it.<sup>21</sup> The ambiguity of the film's ending could provoke a similar critical distance from knee-jerk "blame the lesbian" responses, but it may also be taken as promoting a generalized distrust of all women as potential lesbian man-haters.

The "Kiss My Ice Pick" strategy was adopted by other feminists and gay activists as an attempt to throw gynephobic stereotypes back in men's faces (reverse discourse, or dismantling the master's house with the master's tools). It is in this spirit that Paula Graham asks, "What could be wrong with a film in which women sleep with each other and kill men?"<sup>22</sup> and Ruth Picardie says, "a dyke with two Ferraris who kills men? Now that's a positive image!"<sup>23</sup> These are not merely resistant readings or readings against the grain, for the ambivalence surrounding the "dangerous woman" in erotic thrillers makes a character like Catherine susceptible to female-affirmative and gay-positive readings. If there is a taming-of-the-shrew aspect to Nick's interest in Catherine (hence the almost fatal remark about raising rug rats), her allure for him may also be traced to her impressive independence and authority: she is a successful writer able to author a scene in which a cop like him dies—or lives; she can ice-pick or embrace him. She can find pleasure by herself, with other women, or with men—with no sense of man as the necessary telos; she resists compulsory heterosexuality, marriage, and motherhood, preferring to make her own choice. If the erotic thriller's "dangerous woman" betokens male fears of gender instability and sexual disorientation resulting from the feminist and queer movements of the eighties and nineties, she also offers possibilities of female strength and sexual agency that men too find exciting—even if these possibilities are still often figured through negative cultural stereotypes such as the dominatrix or *femme castratrice*.

### Horror

The uncertainty over whodunit at the end of *Basic Instinct* may be read positively as a way of perpetuating the allure of the "dangerous woman" for the male, but it might also be seen as akin to the fearful open-endedness of the contemporary horror movie, which leaves the way open for a sequel in which the monster will strike again. Patricia Mellencamp takes the latter interpretation of the ending's ambiguity: "This is the economic impulse of the male imaginary—another screenplay for millions of dollars, just as Joe Eszterhas received for this one, the highest price ever paid for a screenplay [\$3 million]. Not answering the question is a matter of men and money, not women and sexuality."<sup>24</sup> Although *Basic Instinct* had no literal sequels, the series of subsequent erotic thrillers in which lesbians or bisexual women are revealed to be in cahoots against the men—for example, *Bitter Harvest* (1993)—would seem to support Mellencamp's theory, though these are often similarly ambivalent in their attitude toward strong women and at least one is strongly gyné-positive—*Bound* (1996).

To the extent that erotic thrillers are phobic fantasies, they naturally borrow from the horror genre. In traditional horror, however, the hero saves the girl from the monster, whereas in

erotic thrillers the girl is the monster or, more accurately, she may be perceived as either the girl of his dreams or the gorgon of his nightmares. As in *Basic Instinct*, it is frequently hard to tell good girl from bad: Nick's caring psychiatrist and former girlfriend, Beth, is blonde, but may have done the killings in a blonde wig; Catherine is suspiciously blonde, but doesn't (seem to) kill in the end(?). Even in films where the murders turn out to have been committed by men—*Sea of Love* (1989), *Color of Night* (1994), *Jade* (1995)—the dangerous aura that has surrounded the female suspect throughout most of the film is not so easily dissipated by a last-minute exculpatory revelation.

If the passive female screaming to be saved in the horror film has mutated into the monstrously strong "dangerous woman" of the erotic thriller, it could be because of a backlash against feminism. Susan Faludi has documented how *Fatal Attraction* actually began as a feminist critique of a married man's irresponsible treatment of the single woman with whom he has an affair. However, writer James Dearden was pressured to do a series of rewrites in which "the husband became progressively more lovable, the single woman more venomous."<sup>25</sup> By the end, Alex/Glenn Close has "metamorphosed from the Other Woman into the Other, Woman"<sup>26</sup> as she threatens to take from Dan/Michael Douglas both his family and his life. Judith Williamson points out that the "threat of invasion which Alex represents is conveyed cinematically by a classic Horror convention: the hand-held camera circling the family house, giving us the point of view of the monster roaming menacingly outside."<sup>27</sup> In the film's finale, Dan and his wife combine to defeat the evil Alex: Dan attempts to drown her in the family bathtub, but when she springs back up for one last scare like many a movie monster, Dan's wife Beth/Anne Archer, a good-girl blonde, shoots the Medusa-locked blonde dead. Beth can be compared to the Final Girl who kills the monster at the end of many contemporary horror films.<sup>28</sup>

Significantly, the original ending to *Fatal Attraction* had *Madame Butterfly* on the soundtrack while Alex cut her throat in despair over having been abandoned by Dan; before she dies, she leaves his fingerprints on the knife to frame him for murder. But this conclusion—more compassionate toward Alex and more insistent on Dan's being held responsible for her fate—was later changed to the monster drowning and shooting we know today. Dearden says that preview audiences didn't like the first ending: "It was not cathartic. . . . They were all wound up to a pitch and then it all kind of went limp and there was no emotional payoff for them. They'd grown to hate this woman by this time, to the degree that they actually wanted him to have some retribution."<sup>29</sup> Director Adrian Lyne described the original ending as "two hours of foreplay with no orgasm."<sup>30</sup> The retributive violence directed against the dangerous woman's body in the final version of this erotic thriller is offered as sexually exciting (erect, orgasmic). Insofar as *Fatal Attraction* ends with a symbolic rape designed to consolidate phallic power, it must be considered strongly reactionary.

Robin Wood has noted how often the monogamous couple with stay-at-home wife is the "norm" in horror films against which the monster—in this case, Alex, the single woman, the working woman—is defined as deviant.<sup>31</sup> Director Lyne's atti-



tude toward women like Alex is worth quoting in full:

They are sort of overcompensating for not being men. It's sad, you know, because it kind of doesn't work. You hear

19 Chris Fowler, qtd. in Charles Lyons, *The New Censors: Movies and the Culture Wars* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 136.

20 Lyons, 138.

21 Phyllis Burke, qtd. in Lyons 135.

22 Paula Graham, qtd. in Lizzie Francke, "Someone to Look At," *Sight and Sound* 6.3 (March 1996), 26-27.

23 Ruth Picardie, "Mad, Bad and Dangerous," *New Statesman and Society* (1 May 1992), 36.

24 Patricia Mellencamp, *A Fine Romance...: Five Ages of Film Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 147.

25 Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1992), 118-19.

26 J. Hoberman, *Vulgar Modernism: Writing on Movies and Other Media* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 247.

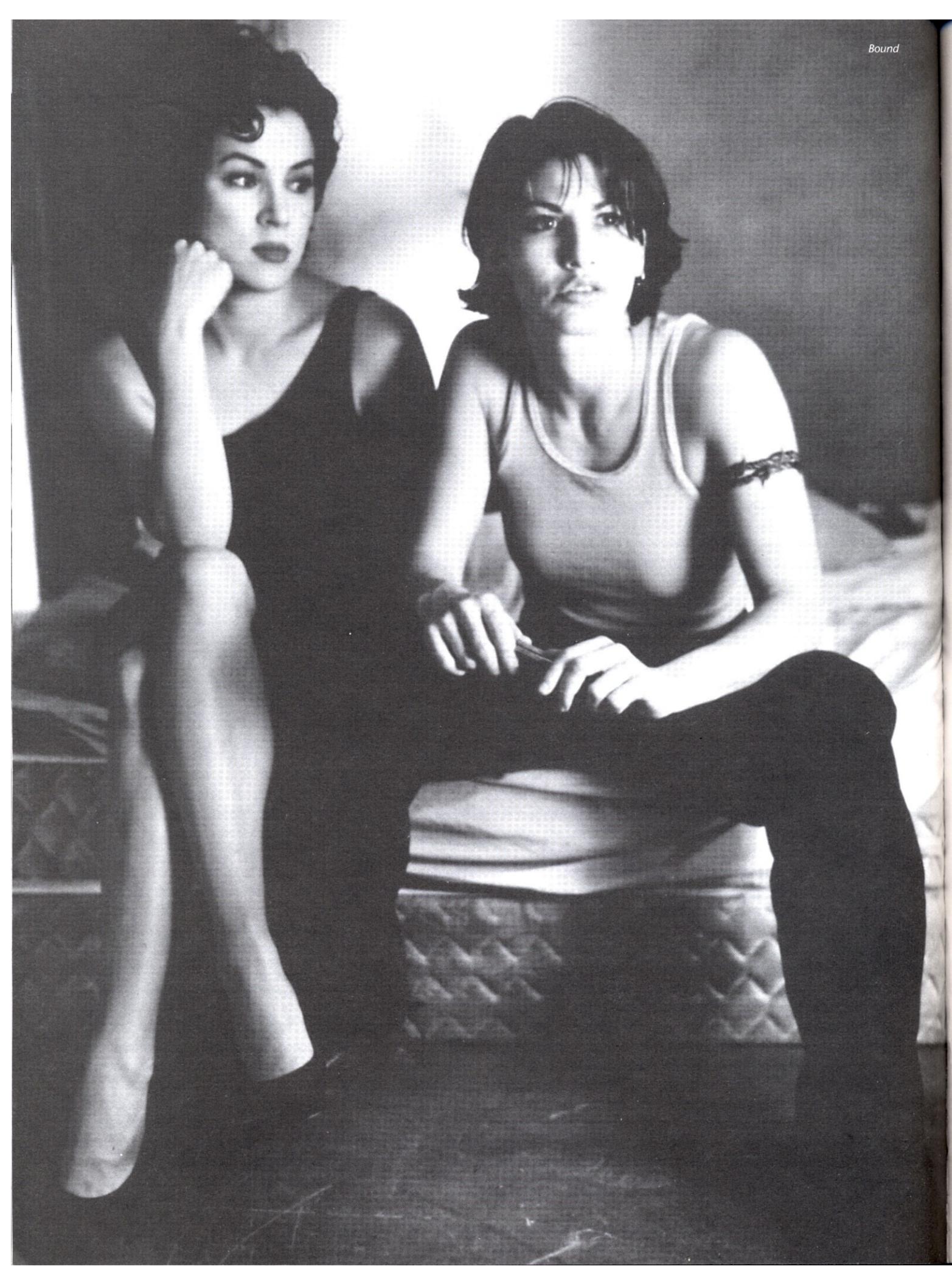
27 Judith Williamson, *Deadline at Dawn: Film Criticism 1980-1990* (New York: Marion Boyars, 1993), 67.

28 See Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

29 James Dearden, qtd. in Faludi, *Backlash*, 122.

30 Adrian Lyne, qtd. in Elaine Berland and Marilyn Wechter, "Fatal/Fetal Attraction: Psychological Aspects of Imagining Female Identity in Contemporary Film," *Journal of Popular Culture* 26.3 (Winter 1992), 41.

31 Robin Wood, "The American Nightmare," *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 70-94.



feminists talk, and the last 10, 20 years, you hear women talking about fucking men rather than being fucked, to be crass about it. It's kind of unattractive, however liberated and emancipated it is. It kind of fights the whole wife role, the whole childbearing role. Sure you got your career and your success, but you are not fulfilled as a woman.

My wife has never worked. She's the least ambitious person I've ever met. She's a terrific wife. She hasn't the slightest interest in doing a career. She kind of lives with me, and it's a terrific feeling. I come home, and she's there.<sup>32</sup>

Small wonder that, once the evil Alex is killed and the camera lingers on a photo of Dan, Beth, and their daughter—the family smilingly restored—the words “AN ADRIAN LYNE FILM” are superimposed over this picture of bliss: Lyne appears to be a true believer in family values.

In *Fatal Attraction*, Alex represents the threat of all that can happen to a man if he indulges in casual, promiscuous, or illicit sex: exposure of the adultery to his wife; divorce resulting in forced separation from his child; competition in the workplace from a smart career woman; voracious sexual demands he isn't man enough to meet; claims on his money and time from another pregnant woman; and death from AIDS—this last being a kind of condensation of the former anxieties into one ultimate fear, unconscious (the word “AIDS” is never mentioned in the film) but all the more powerful for that. As Sarah Harwood describes the contagion, “Dan's brief affair with Alex leads directly to the material penetration of the family (unlike the ‘rules’ Dan invokes [where he is to penetrate her in a one-night stand], AIDS establishes [her penetration of him]). . . . Just as AIDS breaks down the body's immune system, so Alex attacks Dan's immune system (his family, which buttresses and services his public life and production) to render him vulnerable.”<sup>33</sup> In contemporary “slasher” films (*Halloween*, *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*), premarital sex is often punished by death as the monster cuts off contact between the illicit copulators forever. In an erotic thriller like *Fatal Attraction*, the woman with whom the man has forbidden sex is herself the castratory threat, as when Alex comes at Dan with a knife. Thus both genres enforce conventional sexual mores. In its overt gynephobia, *Fatal Attraction* is even more reactionary than most traditional horror movies: although these films are frequently repressive (the monster—Dracula, the Wolf Man—is often the embodiment of the male id that society feels must be put down), *Fatal Attraction* allows Dan to indulge his lust with Alex, then blames and kills her for it. As in horror, free-floating anxiety is projected onto an outsider who is scapegoated. But in the erotic thriller, the outsider's body is that of the independent, sexually active woman.

This description of erotic thrillers as similar to, and more ideologically pernicious than, horror leaves something crucial out of account: the man's *attraction* to the fearsome female. As Alex says to Dan after he has praised his wife and family, “If your life's so damn complete, what were you doing with me?” Robin Wood has argued that some contemporary horror (such as the films of Larry Cohen) can be classified as progressive in that there is a sneaking sympathy for the monster as an oppressed race/class or as the repressed id.<sup>34</sup> A case can be made for the

erotic thriller as extending this liberalizing trend in horror even further: its substitution of a woman for the monster isn't simply or necessarily gynephobic, but could be seen instead as a growing recognition of a strong woman's appeal. Dan's desire for his wife Beth is constantly interrupted by domestic duties (walking the dog, comforting his daughter). Alex saves him from sexual frustration (symbolized by his inability to open an umbrella in the rain). They copulate on the edge of a sink filled with dirty dishes, running water from the faucet over their excited bodies rather than using it dutifully to clean the dishes. While Beth is off scouting for a safe suburban home, Dan and Alex go to her apartment in New York City's meatpacking district, an area depicted as carnal and fiery; she stops the elevator to her loft between floors and goes down on him, and he is almost caught *in flagrante delicto* by a passer-by.

The “dangerous sex” Dan has with Alex ignites his passion and, if the rest of the movie is about his attempt to put out the fire in Alex (and perhaps to find it in his wife)—there is a sensual scene in which he watches Beth rub lotion on her body), we should not forget the original appeal of the erotic thrills that the sexually adventurous Alex has provided. Certainly, viewers who watch these early sex scenes over and over again on video have not forgotten. Another way to say that Alex “seduces” Dan is to point out that he finds her desirable because she is actively *desiring*; apparently, her Medusa locks harden him into something other than stone. And it is worth noting that, while good-girl brunette Beth does shoot bad blonde Alex in the end, the opposition between the two women seems at least partially deconstructed by the film. As Dan begins to appreciate Beth's sexual side after his experience with Alex, Beth's hair begins to be styled in a Medusa-do similar to the other woman's. Furthermore, as Deborah Jermyn remarks, “Beth becomes stronger, more assertive, more violent and thus *monstrous* as the drama enfolds. She flies at Dan in a rage when he confesses to the affair” with Alex.<sup>35</sup> In the film's final scene, Beth rubs steam off the bathroom mirror until there can be seen her face and Alex's behind her, as if Alex were a side of Beth's own self she was just discovering. In struggling with Alex, Beth mirrors the other woman's passionate attachment to Dan, and in shooting her, Beth becomes herself the phallic woman that Alex was, with a power dreaded—and desired—by the man.

32 Adrian Lyne, qtd. in Susan Faludi, “Fatal Distortion,” *Mother Jones* 13.2 (Feb.-March 1988), 49.

33 Sarah Harwood, *Family Fictions: Representations of the Family in 1980s Hollywood Cinema* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), 122.

34 Robin Wood, 95-114.

35 Deborah Jermyn, “Rereading the Bitches from Hell: A Feminist Appropriation of the Female Psychopath,” *Screen* 37.3 (Autumn 1996), 257.

My special thanks to Anne-Marie Williams for her expert research assistance on this project.

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by Patricia A. Suchy

# LAKE EFFECTS

## A “Slowly Turning Narrative”

SULLIVAN: I want this picture to be a document. I want to hold a mirror up to life. I want this to be a picture of dignity—a true canvas of the suffering of humanity.

LEBRAND: But with a little sex.

SULLIVAN: With a little sex in it.

(*Sullivan's Travels*, 1942)



### **Smoke and Mirrors**

My subjects are two Veronicas: the film star and the saint. They are joined by much more than the coincidence of their names. Both are fictions, both icons, both subjects of various popular constructions, projections, and consumptions. This essay plays a mirror game of holding the image of one Veronica up to the other, sometimes catching images of both in a play of endless refraction, of the kind one may achieve by holding one mirror up to another.<sup>1</sup>

Did you ever play the mirror game "Bloody Mary"? I found it in a book on out-of-the-body experience I took home after one of my teenage library excursions. As an adolescent, I read indiscriminately, often while sneaking cigarettes behind the trees in our backyard that veiled me from my mother's gaze through her kitchen window.

In the game of "Bloody Mary" you did this: you gazed into the mirror at your own eyes and repeated her name three times. You kept gazing. Eventually you had the sensation that you had left your body.

Be careful. It works.

Nowadays, open just about any film, cultural studies, or literary academic journal and there'll be at least one essay that compels us to attend to "the" body (whose?) in the configuration of subjectivity. But as an adolescent, I was looking for ways *out* of my body—hence the fascination with this particular game.

Paradoxically, we gaze at mirrors in order to *perceive* ourselves, and yet, at least in the game of Bloody Mary, they allow us to *leave* ourselves. Of course, both perceiving and leaving are illusions, suspect in ways Mikhail Bakhtin describes:

[. . .] our position before a mirror is always somewhat spurious, for since we lack any approach to ourselves from outside [. . .] we project ourselves into a peculiarly indeterminate possible other, with whose help we then try to find an axiological position in relation to ourselves [. . .]; we try to vivify ourselves and give form to ourselves—out of the other. Whence that distinctive and unnatural expression of our face when we see it in the mirror, but which we never have in our lived life.<sup>2</sup>

The "unnatural expression," like the "ghostly" expression Bakhtin detects in the self-portrait, is a result of the lack of a genuine other to aestheticize the self from outside. All that we can see in the mirror is a projection of a possibility, a hypothesis. But the world of the hypothetical seduces us with the possible. As Sabine Melchior-Bonnet observes in her cultural history of the mirror, "the dream of crossing through the mirror responds to a need for being reborn on the other side."<sup>3</sup> As this narrative slips around the two Veronicas—one a sinner and one a saint—I am stalking the hypothetical face in the mirror.

Hans Memling  
St. Veronica  
National Gallery of Art  
Washington D.C.

I can talk about that hair as though it is on some other person. Veronica Lake on the screen doesn't seem to me, Constance Keane, to be myself. I even want to reach up on the screen and yank that hair back from the girl's eye.  
(Veronica Lake, qtd. in James Robert Parish, *The Paramount Pretties*)

### **Verae Iconae**

Always the Photograph astonishes me, with an astonishment which endures and renews itself, inexhaustibly. Perhaps this astonishment, this persistence, reaches down into the religious substance out of which I am molded; nothing for it: Photography has something to do with resurrection: might we not say of it what the Byzantines said of the image of Christ which impregnated St. Veronica's napkin: that it was not made by the hand of man, *acheiropoietos*?

(Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*)

Catholics who participate in the ritual performance of the Stations of the Cross will recognize Saint Veronica from the sixth station as the compassionate woman who wiped Jesus' face with a cloth as he carried his cross to Calvary. Although we may be moved by Veronica's decision to act on her pity as



A patriotic publicity shot.



we move through the ritual, her story, which does not appear in the Bible but in apocryphal texts of the Middle Ages, appears to have been imagined in order to draw our attention to the image on her cloth.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Veronica seems to have been made up, and her tale woven, as it were, of the cloth bearing that image. The image, known variously as the *vera icon*, true image, holy face, veronica, or vernicle, has many manifestations: the Vatican's veronica, reportedly hidden away in one of the columns supporting Michelangelo's dome, may be the most famous, although the very fact of its existence is nowadays shrouded in mystery.<sup>5</sup>

Although she had a relatively short career in Hollywood, Veronica Lake left her mark on the cultural imagination in film noir classics such as *This Gun for Hire* (1942) and *The Blue Dahlia* (1946). Even those who have not been exposed to her films will most likely recognize her image, with her trademark "peek-a-boo bang" hairstyle, various dubbed by the Paramount publicity department as the "Detour Coiffure" and the "Peeping Pompadour."<sup>6</sup> Veronica Lake, the "Cyclops Cinderella," like all Hollywood icons, was a fiction, made up to sell tickets and various consumer goods. A short list of products she promoted includes Lux Soap, Royal Crown Cola, Bexel Vitamins, Calox Toothpaste, Chesterfield Cigarettes, MJB Coffee, Flatternit Hosiery, Westmore's Overglow Make-up, and United States War Bonds. Jeff Lenburg's 1983 biography of Lake works hard to convince the reader that Lake's several failed marriages, her stormy relationship with her mother, her

refusal to cooperate completely with the Hollywood machinery, and her fall from stardom were results of untreated paranoid schizophrenia.<sup>7</sup> In her autobiography, Lake tells a somewhat different story.<sup>8</sup>

### The Rape of the Lock

In an oily slick of adjectives, James Robert Parish describes the iconicity of Veronica Lake:

Possibly no candidate for the pantheon of cinema love goddesses was admitted on such a gimmicky whim as Veronica Lake, whose sulky but beauteous face was characteristically half-obscured by tossed locks of her blonde hair. [...] Her initial popularity was extended by a fortuitous teaming with stone-faced Alan Ladd, he of the sloppy fedora and trenchcoat. They created a new brand of screen lovers, calculating, conscienceless, self-possessed individuals. Their love scenes together were the epitome of restrained ego-feeding, filled with non-sequitur conversation, wisps of cigarette smoke, and bristling icy stares.

In her best pictures, Veronica slunk about magnificently in sequined, square-shouldered gowns. The essence of hauteur, she proved the perfect screen bitch: a lithe, provocative figure, topped by luscious blonde hair partially revealing a lean face with slightly sunken cheeks, big cold eyes . . . and the surprise of her husky, mature voice.<sup>9</sup>

Veronica's veil of hair is of course the most enduring image of her, the image from which any account of her stardom inevitably proceeds. Paramount seized hold of the hair that kept falling in her face during screen tests and built her public persona around it. Lake's hair was the collective fetish object of American popular culture in the early 1940s. It was a wartime fetish.

*Life* magazine reports on November 24, 1941, two weeks before Pearl Harbor, that Lake's hairs number around 150,000, with each hair measuring .0024 inches in cross section. Length: 17 inches in front, 24 in back, falling 8 inches below her shoulders. Every morning she washes her hair twice in "Nulava" shampoo and once again in "Maro" oil, then rinses it in vinegar. This process takes, along with setting and styling, takes one hour and 45 minutes.<sup>10</sup>

When the war effort escalated, and women went to work in the factories manufacturing munitions and airplanes (thus creating another 1940s persona, "Rosie the Riveter"), Lake's hair became a signifier of Rosie's sacrifice. Women who had been emulating the "peek-a-boo" style were running the risk of getting their hair caught in factory machines. When the War Production Board asked Lake to change her hairstyle, she "patriotically" complied.<sup>11</sup>

Lake's role as army nurse Olivia D' Arcy in the Paramount Claudette Colbert vehicle, *So Proudly We Hail* (1943), stages the hair sacrifice thus: Japanese troops are approaching their camp, and the nurses, under the supervision of Colbert's Lieutenant Janet Davidson ("Davy"), are cut off from retreat. Their departure is delayed a few moments while one of the nurses runs



*So Proudly We Hail: Claudette Colbert, Paulette Goddard and Veronica Lake.*

1 The method of this essay is akin to what Godard expressed as "research in the form of spectacle": Gregory L. Ulmer's playful "mystery." See Ulmer's chapter on the mystery in his *Teletheory: Grammatology in the Age of Video* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 82-112. Ulmer coined "mystery" as a descriptor of an experimental approach to writing the expository essay; he projects its primary uses as alternative forms of scholarship and pedagogy. The neologism shows the traces of revisionist historiographical practices in the feminist (re)writing of "history" as "herstory" and in the hermetic, irrational connotations of "mystery." It also emphasizes and activates the researcher's subjectivity—hence *my* story. The mystery, influenced by various poststructuralist theories of writing and textuality, is ideally suited for the contemporary multi-media capabilities of, for instance, hypertext and the internet, where many of Ulmer's students have published their research. Also influenced by surrealist and avant-garde compositional methods, the mystery typically collages multiple discursive genres, from the popular to the professional to the personal. Ross McElwee's reflexive documentary, *Sherman's March* (1986), might stand as a cinematic example of the mystery. In print, see Michael S. Bowman's "Killing Dillinger: A Mystery," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 20 (Oct. 2000): 342-74.

I have also been influenced by Michael S. Bowman's and Ruth Laurion Bowman's careful explanation and extension of Ulmer's mystery into performance pedagogy in "Performing the Mystery: A Textshop in Autoperformance," *Performance Studies: Theory, Pedagogy, Practice*, eds. Cynthia Wimmer and Nathan Stucky (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, forthcoming). My thanks to Bowman and Bowman for sharing the manuscript of their essay in advance of its publication.

2 M. M. Bakhtin, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University

of Texas Press, 1990), 32-33.

3 Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 262.

4 Alban Butler, *The Lives of the Saints Vol. VII (July)*, rev. and ed. Herbert Thurston and Donald Attwater (New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1932), 154.

5 Ian Wilson describes the secrecy surrounding the Veronica "holy face" reportedly kept in St. Peter's in his study of the "true images" that includes various manifestations of Veronica's veil, the Edessa cloth, and the Shroud of Turin: *Holy Faces, Secret Places: An Amazing Quest for the Face of Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991). For Wilson, part of the mystery surrounding St. Peter's Veronica is that despite its popularity, as of 1991 it had never been photographed, and accounts of its appearance vary widely (27-37).

6 Barnaby Conrad III, *The Blonde: A Celebration of the Golden Era from Harlow to Monroe* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999), 82. See also Patrick Agan, *The Decline and Fall of the Love Goddesses* (Los Angeles: Pinnacle Books, 1979), 130.

7 Jeff Lenburg, *Peekaboo: The Story of Veronica Lake* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983). One of Lenburg's main sources, especially regarding the paranoid schizophrenia diagnosis, was Lake's mother, Constance Marinos. In 1948, Marinos, then Constance Keane, sued her daughter for breaking a contract of financial support. The suit resulted in a bitter, well-publicized battle, and mother and daughter never fully reconciled. The accuracy of many of Marinos's statements in Lenburg's text is questionable; however, the accuracy of Lake's own "tell-all" autobiography is also problematic.

8 Veronica Lake, with Donald Bain, *Veronica* (New York: Bantam, 1972).

9 James Robert Parish, *The Paramount Pretties* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1972), 408.

10 "Veronica Lake's Hair: It is a Cinema Property of World Influence," *Life* (24 Nov. 1941): 59.

11 Parish, 416. Nearly every account of Lake's stardom refers to this event.

back to fetch her negligee, and their escorts and driver are shot. Under fire, Davy and the nurses take refuge in a tent. One nurse offers that "if somebody doesn't come we'd better kill ourselves," since "I was in Nan King. I saw what happened to the women there. When the Red Cross protested the Japanese called it 'the privilege of serving his imperial majesty's troops' . . ." Under mounting tension and as Davy crawls around under the truck outside and tries to extract the keys from the body of the driver, Lake as Olivia fetches a grenade, steps outside, and takes off her helmet: "It's one of us or all of us." Over Davy's protests, she lets down her hair, which has been until now tightly coiled around her head. She puts the live grenade in her bra, holds her hands up in the air in surrender, and walks to meet the Japanese soldiers. We hear, but do not see, the explosion, while Davy and the nurses watch in horror.

Eva Kuryluk connects the sacrifice of the golden hair of the Egyptian Queen Berenice II (ca. 269-221 BC) with her namesake, Veronica, and her veil.<sup>12</sup> Berenice cuts off her legendary golden hair when her husband goes to war, as a sacrifice to Venus for his safety. Venus places the hair in the heavens, where it transforms into a constellation of stars. The Greek poet Callimachus's poem, "The Lock of Berenice," celebrates this sacrifice. Berenice's hair, which serves as narrator of his poem, "The Lock of Berenice," mourns:

[. . .] ever parted must I be from the head of my lady; with whom of old, while she was still a virgin, delighting herself with all kinds of perfumes, I drank many thousands.<sup>13</sup>

Kuryluk asserts that "Berenice's cut hair, not unlike Veronica's veil, suggests the loss of virginity and the material manifestation of this loss—the blood-stained sheet which in Muslim countries is still exhibited after the nuptial night." The hair of Berenice resonates with the *vera icon* in that it "celebrates a femininity which is first consumed and then rewarded by men [. . .]."<sup>14</sup>

Fair tresses man's imperial race ensnare,  
And beauty draws us with a single hair.

(Alexander Pope, "The Rape of the Lock" 1.27)

### **Slowly Turning Narrative**

I have stored in my garage an object my husband and I made together for use in projecting some experimental 8 mm films I had worked on in collaboration with students and colleagues. I stole the idea from Bill Viola's installation, "Slowly Turning Narrative."<sup>15</sup> The object is a mirror on one side, a projection screen on the other. It sits atop a black box housing a motor that drives the screen/mirror such that it rotates on an axis. If you aim a projector at the object, the image projected comes into focus on the screen, but as the screen turns, the image keystones and distorts, vanishes for a quick moment, then comes back around as a reflection that shoots around the room as the mirrored surface revolves. The viewer seems to enter into the image, since it surrounds him/her, and in the midst of the projected image, the mirrored surface gives the viewer back

his/her own image signaling through the flames of the projector's light.

Viola's installation aimed two projectors, one from either side of the room housing the installation. I saw it at the Art Institute of Chicago, where I had taken refuge during a squall of "lake effect" snow. After an hour spent in mesmerized fascination with the "Slowly Turning Narrative," I emerged from the installation and the museum and out into a world transformed: fresh, snow-covered Michigan Avenue, a canvas on which slowed-down cars and buses traced patterns with their tires.

In *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts*, Deborah Haynes analyzes the cultural aesthetics of the *Spas nerukotvornyi*, a Russian icon of the holy face from the twelfth century. The icon belongs to the same family of images as the figure of Christ on Veronica's veil, known in the Greek as the *acheiropoietos*, "not made by human hands."<sup>16</sup> This family of images tends to reflect certain contradictions implicit in Christian mythology, and at various historical moments they have presented challenges to the "follies" of iconoclasm.<sup>17</sup> The paradoxes of the cinematic image seem to have marked out for it a similarly controversial journey.

The face on the *Spas* is depicted with one eye looking straight out, the other slightly to the right, as if to see into "our space; and also into an unknown, perhaps otherworldly dimension."<sup>18</sup> As such, Haynes designates it a "borderline face," a sort of perfect other, and the opposite of the "fraudulent image" or "optical forgery" Bakhtin finds when he looks into a mirror.<sup>19</sup> Gazing at the *Spas*, in contrast to gazing in a mirror, presents us with a genuine other. However, this gaze is complicated by the Orthodox Christian traditions that "we interpret the icon from within, as it were, from the Savior's perspective" and that contemplation of an icon "serves as a channel of grace, enabling a change of identity of the person who venerates it."<sup>20</sup> In other words, the *Spas* sets up before us a *true mirror*, made possible by the presence of the other into whom we project, and through whose eyes we gaze back at ourselves looking in.

Spectatorship in the cinema may involve a similar yet secular kind of transference. The cinematic image is, of course, "made by human hands," or *cheiropoietos*, with the connotation of idolatry.<sup>21</sup> However, the power of its photographic illusion, especially in the classical Hollywood narrative mode, may serve to efface the hand that made it. The close-up face of Veronica Lake, one eye gazing out at us, the other obscured by her hair, might also be described as "borderline," in the sense of the star as a paradoxical "structured polysemy."<sup>22</sup> In his "Metaphysics of the Body," Leo Braudy observes that "[t]he people that we see in movies are both reflections and ideals, bridges by which we enter the film and extensions of parts of ourselves. [. . .] Film idealizes the face and preserves the performance, making it more permanent and seemingly more true."<sup>23</sup>

### **"I Wanted Wings"**

When we put together our own "Slowly Turning Narrative" device, my husband and I tried it out with a slide projector and an arbitrarily chosen slide from a box that was ready at hand.

The image on the slide we happened to pick up was of his parents, taken sometime during World War II. His father, a Navy pilot, flew Hellcats in the Pacific. (My husband and I watch a lot of World War II films, and, probably because his father was a "Hellcat of the Navy," we are especially fond of the heroic pilot subgenre.) When we loaded the slide into the projector, the image of my father-in-law in uniform, his arm around his young bride, dressed smartly as any 1940s movie starlet, floated and flew around our living room, washing over us, performing a strangely intimate dance with the two of our transfixed images as the mirror gently swept us around and around.

**Hollywood had, quite naturally, captured my imagination as it had that of most other young girls. It had exerted its powerful and mysterious magnetism, in darkened theatres where shadowy images flickered on large screens and dashing gentlemen spoke to frail, beautiful women, their words in surprising syncopation with their lips. I'd sit there [ . . . ] and be swept away [ . . . ]. What splendor fifty cents could buy. What virile men and what fortunate women to be with those men.**

(Veronica Lake, *Veronica*)

12 Eva Kuryluk, *Veronica and Her Cloth: History, Symbolism, and Structure of a "True" Image* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 102-103.

13 Qtd. in Kuryluk, 103-104.

14 Kuryluk, 103.

15 "Bill Viola: A 25-Year Survey," The Art Institute of Chicago (Oct. 16 – Jan. 9, 2000). The exhibit was organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

16 Deborah Haynes, *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 137. See also Kuryluk, 28-30.

17 Kuryluk, 148.

18 Haynes, 143.

19 Haynes, 143; Bakhtin, 32.

20 Haynes, 142; 135.

21 Haynes, 137.

22 Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1979), 3. See also Robert C. Allen's case study of Joan Crawford, reprinted as "The Role of the Star in Film History," *Film Theory and Criticism*, Fifth Edition, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 547-63, which follows Dyer's "structured polysemy" approach to analyze Crawford's star persona in "four categories of texts: (1) promotion, (2) publicity, (3) films, and (4) criticism and commentary" (548). Allen's case study contains interesting resonances with the naming of both Veronicas as explored below. He provides, for instance, an account of how Crawford's name came about, through MGM's public contest to name their new starlet (551-52).

23 Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films* ((Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 212.

Sullivan's Travels: Joel McCrea and Veronica Lake



## Pherenike

Kuryluk exposes the connection between Saint Veronica and the term *vera icon* as one of false but fateful etymology:

The Veronica myth is derived from a New Testament episode which was given further attention in apocryphal Syriac and Greek texts written in the first Christian centuries in Asia Minor. The relevant biblical scene (Mt. 9:20-2; Mk. 5:25-34; Lk. 8: 43-8) is the curing of the Hemorrhissa, the anonymous woman with the issue of blood, a permanent menstruation, whose flux stops when she touches the hem of Jesus' dress. [ . . . ] In the fourth-century apocryphal *Acts of Pilate*, the Hemorrhissa is for the first time called Berenice, a Macedonian version of the Greek name Pherenice (= Phere-nike = bearer [of] victory)—an appropriate name for the bearer of Christ's *vera icon*.<sup>24</sup>

In the curing of the Hemorrhissa episode, according to Mark and Luke (Matthew is terser on the incident), when she touches Jesus' garments he "perceive[s] that power has gone forth from [him]" (Mk. 5:30; Lk. 8:46). Many scholars link her touch that draws forth power to a lover's touch. Veronica's possession of the reproduction of Christ's face may then be read as a sort of "mystical conception" of the image born(e) subsequently on Veronica's cloth.<sup>25</sup> The mysterious, victorious image Veronica carries grew extremely popular during the Crusades, where we may read it as a banner proclaiming the power and predicting the triumph of Christianity, and also a stern seduction into the faith. Veronica and her cloth were wartime fetishes.

Before he died, my husband's father gave us a few pieces of silken cloth inscribed with colorful maps of various locations in the South Pacific. These were the maps he carried with him in his Hellcat. If his plane went down or he had to bail out over the ocean, a paper map would probably be ruined. The Navy cleverly issued maps printed on silk, which was lightweight and durable, dried quickly, and could hold its shape even after being wadded up compactly and jammed into a pocket. The silk map might also, in a pinch, double handily as a handkerchief, useful for staunching a sneeze or the flow of blood from a wound.

This cloth he carried—I can hold it up to my cheek and think of where it was, how it traveled, what it meant to its bearer. After the war, many Navy wives wore the maps as scarves, more proudly, I suppose, than fashionably—although such a display of American victory was fashionably patriotic.

Alan Ladd died in *This Gun for Hire* with his head resting in my lap. *Variety* commented, "Better men have died with their heads in less pleasant places."

(Veronica Lake, *Veronica*)

## The Double Life of Veronique

All my life I've felt I was in two places at the same time.  
Here and somewhere else.

(Krzysztof Kieslowski's *The Double Life of Veronique*, 1991)

Saint Veronica is usually depicted holding her veil as if to display it to the viewer: here is the image that I have. Her claim seems to resonate with Barthes' "banal" *noeme* of photography: "That has been."<sup>26</sup> But look more closely. On the veil we see the disembodied face of Jesus. In some images of Veronica, the face appears faint, bleached-out, stains on a cloth, in contrast to the face and body of the woman and her environment, usually suggestive of Calvary. The face on the veil, we are meant to understand, is a "real" impression of the face, such as one might see on the Shroud of Turin, which, some current theories propose, might have been made by some sort of "photographic" transfer.<sup>27</sup> What happens to "that has been" if the photographic reproduction is adapted into a painting? Does "That has been" continue to be? Or is this a Platonic problem: does the further remove from the original reduce the image's power? Or does the depiction of Veronica alongside her veil introduce a narrator?

The image Veronica shows us, even if portrayed "realistically," is usually too perfected to be an impression left by contact with a real face, and also too painterly to be convincingly photographic. Yet, although the image of the woman holding the cloth is painterly, too, it is usually differently so—mostly this is the effect of the frame, Veronica's cloth, which makes Christ's head hover in idealized space. Veronica's face is attached to her body, as well as at least somewhat more integrally to the landscape surrounding her.

My favorite image of Veronica is in Hieronymous Bosch's "Encounter of Christ and Veronica." Christ is shoudering the cross, surrounded by a churning mob. Veronica is off in a corner. The energy of everyone else in the composition drives forward to the left, but she looks to the right, and the painter has portrayed her as she pauses to look at her cloth. Christ must have just wiped his face on it. She is smiling, an enigmatic smile, like that of the Mona Lisa. Her face displays, and in some ways conceals, a calm beauty, in contrast to the scowls on the grotesque faces of the mob surrounding her. The "real" Christ is present in the painting for comparison against the cloth; Veronica completes the circuit between the two faces. Her gaze is intimate. She holds her veil like a secret. To me, the most striking aspect of Bosch's Veronica is that the blurry face on her cloth signifies unusually far less than Veronica's reaction to it. It inverts Laura Mulvey's equation for "visual pleasure": "woman as image, man as bearer of the look".<sup>28</sup>

The usual image of Christ's face floating in blank space on Veronica's cloth as she presents it to us strongly and anachronistically recalls for me the cinematic close-up. Might I then read it as projection? The camera obscura was known to many of Veronica's Renaissance painters; the notion of the Lord as a light source was encoded in ancient times. Did the artists understand the images of Christ's face as coming from a place outside the canvas, as if projected onto Veronica's cloth from behind the spectator's (and the artist's) back? Read this way, the image becomes a parable of cinema—unknowingly, perhaps presciently so. Veronica becomes part of the cinematic apparatus, the owner of the representation. The artists who paint her must have felt a special sort of sympathy with her. She holds the frame within the frame, is perhaps the artist

within the artwork—or at least, she possesses the divine image, controls our gaze upon it and can appear to be about to conceal it from us, as in the Bosch. What did the “Master of Veronica” see when he painted her? Was he conscious of the reflexivity—of course. But how did he think of it? Did Veronica’s diegetic presence distance him from the holy face, or did it bring him closer?

The Catholic Forum notes that Veronica is the patron saint of laundry workers and photographers.<sup>29</sup>

The *vera icon* seems to burst through the kind of fiction Christian Metz claims for the cinematic image when he claims “every film is a fiction film” because the cinema traffics in “shadows” and “absence.”<sup>30</sup> Veronica presents the shadow of the absent Christ as proof of presence, or perhaps of a different order of absence, immortal. Or we might consider that the shadow on Veronica’s veil has more weight than the shadows of cinema. Part of the weight of the Holy Face image comes from its direct contact with the face it represents; it is a sort of contact print, with blood and sweat in the emulsion. It encodes excruciating intimacy. But this is to believe in the image’s “truth,” and perhaps also to forget the proliferation of modern “true images,” which, as Kuryluk writes, “keep displaying—even while the progress of technology turns them thinner and ‘truer’—the same old stuff: the body of a woman and the face of a man.”<sup>31</sup>

When the true image is displayed without Veronica, it demands a different kind of attention from me. But if the artist depicts the face framed by cloth, as in Albrecht Dürer’s sixteenth-century engraving or Gabriel Max’s nineteenth-century “Jesus Christus” painting, Veronica’s story, and her presence, lingers in the image. Her cloth, like the other Veronica’s hair, is almost interchangeable with her body.

## Unveiling Images

[. . .] in cinema, no doubt, there is always a photographic referent, but this referent shifts, it does not make a claim in favor of its reality, it does not protest its former existence; it does not cling to me: it is not a specter.

(Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*)

Three specters from Veronica Lake movies:

1) In *Sullivan’s Travels* (1942), Veronica Lake as “The Girl” thinks that Joel McCrea, as Sullivan, the movie director, is dead. But he has really been in prison, and he stages a resurrection by confessing to his own murder. News of his “confession” is splashed all over the front pages of the newspapers. When “The Girl” discovers this, she is on a movie set and is wearing a southern belle costume evocative and parodic of Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone with the Wind*. She holds a newspaper bearing Sullivan’s picture, realizes that he is still alive, and, clutching the newspaper, runs through the studio lot, knocking into people with her hoop skirt and doing signature Sturges pratfalls in her rush to get to the office of Lebrand, Sullivan’s producer. She bursts into Lebrand’s office and displays the newspaper, holding it outstretched in front of her torso.

Not, then, “That has been,” but “He lives.”

2) In *So Proudly We Hail!* (1943), the sullen silence of Lake’s Olivia D’Arcy has made her unpopular among the nurses. Colbert’s Davy has been “prying,” trying to get to the bottom of Olivia’s problem. While questioning her, Davy picks up a locket that Olivia usually wears around her neck, and Olivia snatches it back. Davy scolds her for her lack of cooperation and camaraderie, and reminds Olivia that they are at war.

OLIVIA: You think I don’t know—All right, I’ll tell you. I know what we’re doing. I know why we’re here. I know what I’m going to do. I’m going to kill Japs—every blood-stained one I can get my hands on!

DAVY: Olivia!

OLIVIA: That doesn’t sound nice coming from a nurse, does it? We’re supposed to be angels of mercy. We’re supposed to tend to the wounded and to be kind and tender and to serve humanity in the name of humanity. What humanity? Jap humanity?

DAVY: Olivia, be quiet!

OLIVIA: No, you asked me, you wanted to know, you pried into things that didn’t concern you. You wanted to know what this is.

*Olivia picks up her locket, holds it open in front of her torso, displaying it.*

Look—look at that! Do you know what it is? I’ll tell you—it’s a boy. [. . .] Today is Christmas, isn’t it? The time for cheer and good fellowship and for peace. Well today’s my wedding day. Do you see that? He and I were to be married today in St. Louis. And why didn’t we? Because he’s dead. He died that first morning. They killed him, I saw it. He was running across the field to his plane and they killed him. Sixty bullets. Sixty! By the time I got to him he was dead. His face was gone. I couldn’t see him any more, just blood, blood all over—

Not just “That has been,” but, more significantly, “It isn’t any more,” and “That’s why I am this now.”

3) *Flesh Feast* (Viking International, 1970): In the final scene of Lake’s final, luridly sad screen appearance, she plays Dr. Eileen Frederick, a plastic surgeon hired by a gang of Miami Mafioso to rejuvenate Hitler’s face (he’s still alive) for his planned resurrection. Dr. Frederick pioneers a surgical tech-

23 Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films* ((Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 212.

24 Kuryluk, 5.

25 Kuryluk, 6.

26 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 115.

27 Ian Wilson, “Could the Shroud [of Turin] be the Work of a Mediaeval Photographer?,” *The Blood and the Shroud* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 210-18.

28 Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” rpt. in *Film Theory and Criticism*, Fifth Edition, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 833-44.

29 <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/saintvo2.htm>.

30 Christian Metz, excerpts from *The Imaginary Signifier*, rpt. in *Film Theory and Criticism*, Fifth Edition, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 800-817.

31 Kuryluk, 224.

nique involving a special kind of maggot she breeds which, when applied to the face, will eat away the old flesh and thus accomplish the rejuvenation—a sort of grotesque juxtaposition of modern dermabrasion techniques with the medieval practice of applying leeches to human flesh. Miami seems a curious place to resurrect Hitler, but the film doesn't seem conscious of the irony. At the end of the film, Hitler is on the table and Dr. Frederick is about to apply the maggots—only they are a more vicious sort of maggot, secretly bred by Dr. Frederick, who turns out to have been double-crossing the Mafia all along. The maggots she applies will in fact eat Hitler's face, and then continue, one supposes, to consume his body.

Dr. Frederick is strapping Hitler to her table:

DR. F.: Are you comfortable?

HITLER: Thanks to you, within a year I'll free the world.

Doctor, do the straps have to be so tight?

DR. F.: I'm terribly sorry. I know how terribly uncomfortable you must feel. But it's very important. [ . . . ]

*She begins tying down his hands, and he protests:*

HITLER: What are you doing? The face—it was supposed to be the face!

DR. F.: The commander will look very strange with a young face and old hands. [ . . . ] Do you mind if I lift your head a moment—please, there.

*She lifts his head and stuffs a pillow behind it to prop him up, then gestures to something he is looking at out of frame:*

DR. F.: There—that's my mother. She's very beautiful, isn't she?

HITLER: Yes, she was a good German woman.

DR. F.: Yes, she was at Camp Ravensbrook.

HITLER: She was in the service of the Third Reich, no?

DR. F.: Oh yes, she was in the service of the Third Reich—as a guinea pig for this treatment!

HITLER: Nonsense—what we were doing at Ravensbrook was for medical science and for the glory of the Third Reich.

*At this, we see a close-up of Lake's face as she raises one eyebrow—a gesture familiar from her earlier films, made strange on the aging, bloated face. She begins applying the maggots to Hitler's face:*

DR. F.: And this one is for democracy.

HITLER: Are you insane? (calling to his henchmen) Karl! Benito! I had nothing to do with it! It was Eichmann and Goebbels.

DR. F.: No, it was you. Only you.

HITLER: Nein! Karl, Karl!

*Dr. Frederick continues her assault with the maggots, punctuated by Hitler's screams. She taunts him:*

DR. F.: Doctors and butchers and maniacs! Doctors and butchers and maniacs! Remember, dear Fuhrer, this is all in the interest of medical science. Ha, ha, ha ha! Now you're going to get what you gave. I do hope you're enjoying yourself. [ . . . ]

*After a cross-cut to a scene outside the lab, we rejoin Hitler, still screaming, for Dr. Frederick's revelation:*

DR. F.: Don't worry, you won't be alone while you die.

Mother and I will stay right here with you. Of course we're not all Aryans, but we're the best you have.

*She moves around the table and the camera follows so that the portrait of her mother is revealed. It is of her head only, and she has long blonde hair.*

DR. F.: What's the matter? Don't you like my little maggots?

Oh well, I understand. Mother didn't like them very much either. Ha! Ha ha ha ha ha ha! Heil Hitler!

*She continues laughing as "Heil Hitler" reverberates on the soundtrack. We cut from the image of Dr. Frederick displaying her mother's portrait to a close-up of Hitler's maggotty face, with superimposed title:*

THE END.

Not just, then, "That has been," but "That has been and so this will be."

All three "mad" images, as Barthes might say, "chafed by reality,"<sup>32</sup> and in the last two, by history, projected through two decaying faces.

### Peek-a-boo

*Flesh Feast* was not the first time Lake shared the screen with Hitler. In *Star-Spangled Rhythm* (released 1943), Paramount uses the device of a variety show for sailors as a premise to display several of their contract stars—among them, Veronica Lake. Her appearance is with Paulette Goddard and Dorothy Lamour in a musical number, "A Sweater, a Sarong, and a Peek-a-boo Bang." The conceit of the song is that the women object to being reduced to their respective trademark "gimmicks":

We came out to make the grade in moving pictures.

We came out to mingle with the glamour gang.

But we're sorry that we came

For our only claim to fame

Is a sweater, a sarong, and a peek-a-boo bang.

The number features a transvestite twist when Goddard, Lamour, and Lake soft-shoe behind a painted column and from the other side emerge three men dressed campily as the women, with "Lake" played by Sterling Holloway in a wig. At the end of the number, the women, who have re-emerged from the column, sing:

For these costumes that we wear we take no credit

And we'd like to tell you all from whence they sprang:

Three designers that we know

Set the fashion long ago—

Mussolini, Hirohito, and a peek-a-boo bang.

On the last line, they gesture toward a painted balcony, from which pop up actors costumed as Mussolini in a turtleneck sweater, Hirohito in a sarong, and Hitler, his forelock of hair exaggerated and hanging over one eye.

## Consuming Images

eBay item 1157219982

(ends June 24 01 14:49:34)

Current price: \$199.00

Reserve has been met.

### Description:

An original-size 2nd Class Cloth Relic of the Holy Face of Christ (Veronica's Veil), authenticated and sealed by the Canons of St. Peter's Basilica, ca. 1860-1880.

It is one of the most holy relics of Christianity: The "Veil of Veronica" or "Holy Face," preserved in Rome since the time of Emperor Tiberius (1st C.) and venerated at least since the 8th Century in St. Peter's Basilica.

According to the legend, Veronica was a pious woman from Jerusalem who saw Christ on His way to Calvary and, full of compassion, used her veil to clean His face from sweat and blood. When she took it back, His Most Holy Face appeared miraculously on the cloth!

Next to the Turin Shroud, the Veronica is the other famous image of Christ "not created by human hands," inspiring Christian iconography until today. Veronica's encounter became a regular station on the Way of the Cross, and even today, once a year, pilgrims receive a blessing with the Most Holy Relic in St. Peter's on Passion Sunday. It is kept in a special relic chapel in one of the four main pillars of St. Peter's.

In the 19th Century, the devotion to the Holy Face was propagated by ven. Pope Pius IX and, among others, St. Therese de Lisieux, "The little flower", who took the name "Sister Therese of the Infant Jesus and the Holy Face."

In 1849, Pope Pius IX fled to Gaeto during a revolution. He allowed a three-day-exposition of the Holy Face in hopes of ending all the troubles that had fallen upon the Church. By the third day, a light appeared around the image, it took on color, and the eyes sunk in. At that point, the Pope ordered the Church bells to ring and commissioned an artist to copy the Face. Reproductions of his work, printed in linen, touched by the original relic and verified as 2nd class relics with the official seal of the Canons of St. Peter's, were later produced and given to a few privileged [sic] pilgrims, who took it to their Church or Convent.

Today they are extremely rare to find, and only through good connections on Rome I was able to locate a few. THIS IS ONE OF THEM, ca. 400x300 mm—16x12 inches in size, from 1860-80, found (with others) in the archives of a religious institute in Rome, verified in its 2nd Class Relic status by the original stamped seal. Its inscription states: *VERA EFFIGIES SACRI VULTUS DOMINI NOSTRI JESU CHRISTI—Que Reme in Sacrosancta Basilica S. Pietri in Vaticano Religiosissime Observatur et Colitur—True Image of the Face of Our Lord Jesus Christ—which is venerated in Rome [in] the Most Holy Basilica St. Peter[.] The seal stamp itself states: SS. PATRIARCHALIS BASILICA VATICANA.*

This precious relic of the Holy Face will inspire you to

meditate on Christ's Suffering for our Salvation. Bid with confidence—the authenticity is guaranteed! Good luck and God bless you!<sup>33</sup>

Mostly Veronica is banished from the canon, dismissed as a gimmick, surrounded by untrustworthy narrators. Mostly what I gather of Veronica are images, piles and piles of them, accumulating in "jpeg" files on my hard drive, produced and circulated as close-up, holy card souvenirs.

## Nomen est Omen

The name Veronica, the Latin form of Berenice, was not derived, as one might have suspected and was occasionally suggested, from *vera icon* [see above, under "Pherenike"]. But since *nomen est omen*, the popularity of Veronica and her vernicle was certainly increased by the false etymology.

(Eva Kuryluk, *Veronica and Her Cloth*)

Veronica Lake was born with the kind of name Preston Sturges was fond of making up: Constance Ockleman. After her father's spectacular death in a steamship accident, her mother remarried and Constance took her stepfather's last name, Keane. Constance Keane went to Hollywood and was credited in several bit roles as by that name until her breakthrough role in *I Wanted Wings* in 1941.

In the Hollywood legend, Constance Keane became Veronica Lake through the agency of a Paramount producer with his own Sturgesian name, Arthur Hornblow, Jr.:

" [...] believe me, the right name, a name that the public can latch on to and remember can make all the difference. [...] The name has to...well, is has to be the person, or at least what the fan thinks that person is. [...] It has to do with images."<sup>34</sup>

For Hornblow, the name "Veronica" was "classic," to match his protégé's brand of beauty, and "Lake" connoted the cool depths of her eyes.<sup>35</sup> Lenburg's version of the renaming claims that Hornblow took "Veronica" from his secretary's name.<sup>36</sup>

## O Mother, Where Art Thou?

And then it hit me. My mother was sometimes called Veronica. Of all the goddamn names in the world to

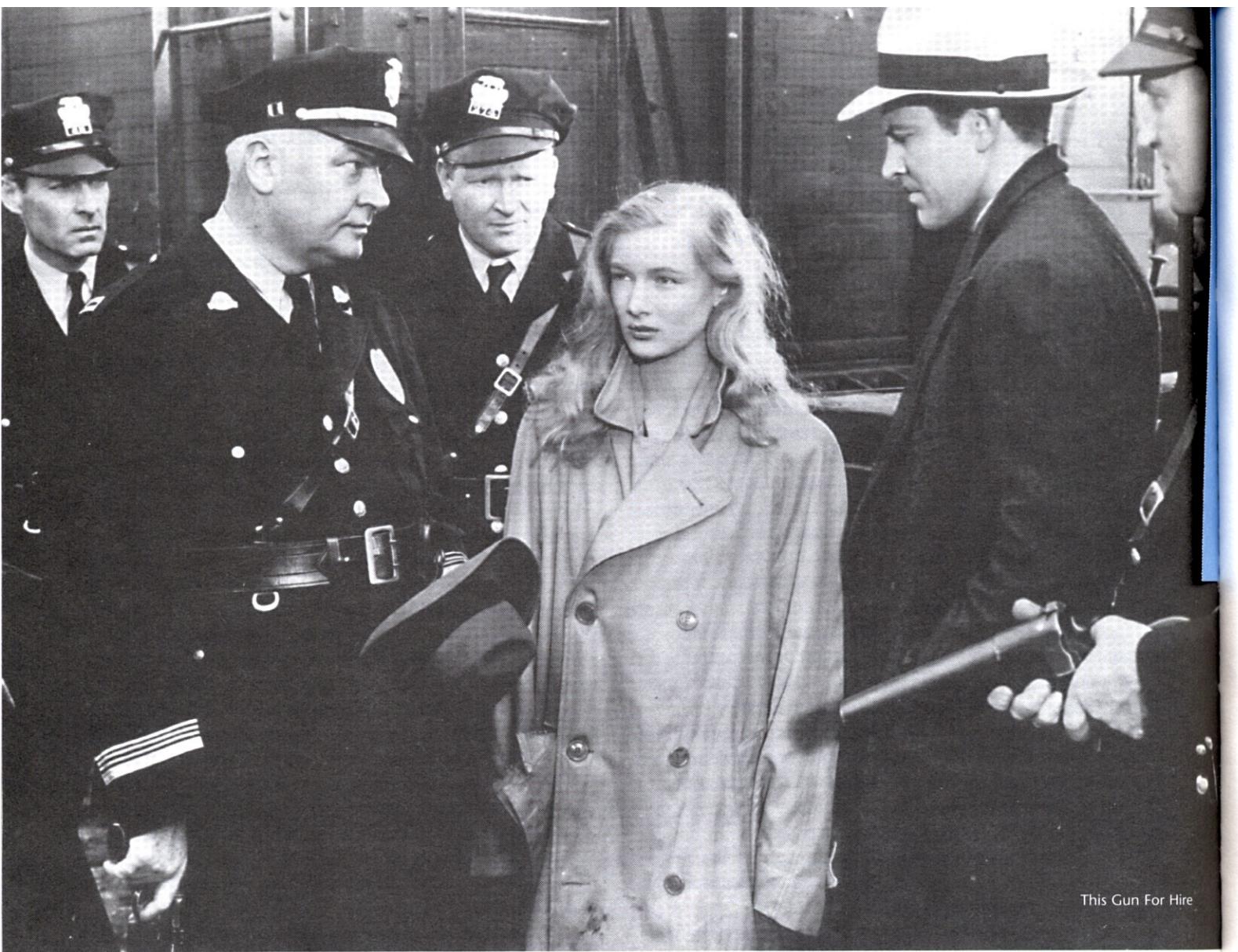
32 Barthes, 115.

33 [http://cgi.ebay.com/aw-cgi/eBayISAPI.dll?ViewItem&item=1157219982&r=0&t=0&showTutorial=0&ed=993419374&indexURL=0&r\\_d=1](http://cgi.ebay.com/aw-cgi/eBayISAPI.dll?ViewItem&item=1157219982&r=0&t=0&showTutorial=0&ed=993419374&indexURL=0&r_d=1). The auction closed on June 24, 2001, with my winning bid. This listing will expire after several months. The description of this object was written by Michael Hesemann, who is currently participating in a study of the Vatican's veronica. In personal correspondence, Hesemann informs me that he has recently been permitted to film the veronica for the first time in its history.

34 Arthur Hornblow Jr., qtd. in Lake, 40.

35 Lake, 40-41.

36 Lenburg, 37



This Gun For Hire

choose. [...] I told my mother when I got home and I'm certain she considered it the rightful will of Hollywood's gods. But there are bad gods, too.

(Veronica Lake, *Veronica*)

... Out of windows look mother faces  
knowing love is a deep well  
and a mirror of shadow-changes:  
here looms water for a deep thirst,  
here gleams a looking-glass too dark  
to print a face and foretell a fate  
and bring a moan.

(Carl Sandburg, "Out of Windows Look Mother Faces")

### Mirror Stages

Surely one of the most suggestive variations on the cinematic mirror shot is the one where a female character finds her mate when she opens her compact to look at herself. In *The Lady Eve*

(1941), Barbara Stanwyck trains her gaze on Henry Fonda in this manner, and in *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), Veronica Lake hooks back up with Alan Ladd—he on the lam for the suspected murder of his wife, she on the lam from her failing marriage—when she spots him in a compact she has taken from her purse in order to primp in it. Stanwyck's gaze resembles the deliberate "portable keyhole" voyeurism of *Rear Window*; she begins stalking Fonda by observing all the other women on shipboard who are stalking him, providing running commentary on the small movie she watches framed in her compact, which has roughly the same aspect ratio as the screen that contains her.<sup>37</sup> Lake's gaze is both more oblique and more innocent; the plot needs Ladd and Lake to reconnect, so the meeting is staged in the "accidentally" caught reflection. But what the scenes have in common, other than the fact of their mirror-staging, is that the image of the man reflected in the compact mirror (suggestively stored in the woman's *purse*) in fact contains the image of the woman who gazes into it, projected through or onto the male. Both mirrors express an ironic like-mindedness that the characters in question cannot at these points in

the plot fully grasp. In *The Lady Eve*, both Stanwyck's Jean and Fonda's "Hopsie" (Charles) "[hold] life at bay"<sup>38</sup> and eventually will be redeemed and brought fully into life through mutual, irrational love. In *The Blue Dahlia*, both Ladd's Johnny and Lake's Joyce are the victims of unfaithful, abusive spouses. At the point of their coincidence in the compact mirror, they do not sense the full import of their meeting. Only later will they discover that Joyce's husband is the man who has been seeing Johnny's wife. The mirror completes the circuit of what has been going on "behind their backs." As spectators, we have privileged views of these mirror scenes; we can see and interpret the relation between the mirrored men and the women who gaze through mirrors at them as dramatic "truth."

Saint Veronica also carries a kind of compact, an impression suggestive of a covenant written in the blood that streaks the face depicted on the veil. In her origin as the Hemorrhissa, we may also detect, as Kuryluk does,<sup>39</sup> Veronica's resemblance to the image she carries; they meet in blood, each staunching the flow of the other's.

### We Wanted Wings

My fascination with Veronica Lake originated outside of the cinema. Back in the indiscriminate reading days of my adolescence, I brought home a paperback that had been displayed on one of those rotating wire book racks along with tattered Barbara Cartlands, the public library's supply of which my best friend and I had by then exhausted. We were in search of something new, and frankly, the formulae of the bodice-ripper genre were beginning to bore me.

Mixed in among the Harlequin romances was Veronica Lake's autobiography, and it featured an image of Veronica in a slinky white dress on the cover, her long blonde hair hanging over one eye. The image might have attracted me, or it might have been the title, *Veronica*. A year or two before, under the mandate to come up with a saint's name to take into my own for my confirmation in the Catholic church, I had somehow decided on Veronica. She was important, I knew, because an entire station of the cross was devoted to her.

Although I cannot recall precisely the impetus for checking out the paperback *Veronica*, I remember vividly how richly rewarded I was upon reading, toward the end of the book, this description of her last boyfriend:

Andy was a man, so much a man, proportionately large in all things, rough within bounds, serious when making love and playful after we'd spent each other. [ . . . ] Our bed was sacred [ . . . ], two bodies in the dark put to work by two minds in each other's interest. [ . . . ] And when it was time, I welcomed him over me, in me, his entrance, his throbbing moment of release, and I stated my pleasure in a tight whine as we so often achieved a miraculous and simultaneous climax—mutual detonation.<sup>40</sup>

This was perhaps only a half-step beyond bodice-buster discourse, but it sufficed. *Veronica* circulated outside the library among my girlfriends, with passages like these marked for sam-

pling. My temporary ownership of the text made me very popular for awhile. And it made curious Veronica Lake fans of most of the females in my seventh grade class, who took to trying to copy the hairstyle depicted in the book's photographs. But this was all soon forgotten when we advanced to Isadora Wing's much more gratifyingly explicit confessions and Farrah Fawcett's angel wings of hair.

### O Sister, Where Art Thou?

**From:** Alejandro Gonzalez

**Newsgroups:** alt.folklore.ghost-stories

**Subject:** Bloody Mary, Veronica and the Scarlet Woman

**Date:** Mon, 06 Oct 1997 01:55:03 +0100

[ . . . ] Veronica was a girl who played with the ouija board, using scissors to point out the letters. She was driven mad by spirits and killed herself burying the scissors down her throat.

But she is not gone; if you play with the ouija board without taking the issue seriously (or if you play with it at all, maybe) she will come and kill you with her scissors. And if you say her name in front of the mirror three times at midnight you will see her in the glass, with the scissors still in her neck...<sup>41</sup>

[. . .] *This Gun for Hire* turned [Alan] Ladd and Veronica Lake into the sexiest commodities in Hollywood; a pair of diminutive and sullenly pretty blonds, they seem an almost incestuous couple [ . . . ].

(James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts*)

### The Mirror Crack'd: Moments of Being

Wasteful mirrors, never yet has what you are been described  
You with nothing but riddled holes  
Intervals filled with time.

(Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*)

Witness the incident of the looking-glass. Though I have done my best to explain why I was ashamed of looking at my own face I have only been able to discover some possible reasons; there may be others; I do not suppose that I

37 Compare (and in some ways, contrast) Mary Anne Doane's analysis of "Girls Who Wear Glasses" in the cinema in "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 41-57. For Doane, the "cliché" of the woman wearing glasses in classical Hollywood cinema signals the "excessiveness" of the woman "usurping" the male gaze; she must be "punished" or "transformed into spectacle" via removal of her glasses (50-51).

38 Diane Jacobs, *Christmas in July: The Life and Art of Preston Sturges* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 259.

39 Kuryluk, 5-6.

40 Lake, 222.

41 Posted to the newsgroup cited in the text, under the heading "Obiwan's UFO-free Paranoia Page."

have got at the truth; yet this is a simple incident; and it happened to me personally; and I have no motive for lying about it. In spite of all this, people write what they call 'lives' of other people; that is, they collect a number of events, and leave the person to whom it happened unknown.<sup>42</sup>

(Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*)

ca. 1935: In Saranac, New York, Constance Keane, age 13, is left alone by her mother with a parish priest, who makes Constance sit in his lap while he fondles her.<sup>43</sup>

1940: During Constance Keane's screen test for *I Wanted Wings*, Paramount director Ted Weaks, impressed with the size of her breasts, has the camera focus in tightly on Constance's body while William Holden and Richard Webb speak from off camera. According to Webb, Weaks wanders the Paramount lot bragging about the size of the new girl's breasts.<sup>44</sup> Paramount producers seem more interested in her hair.

1962: The *New York Post* breaks the story that the "fallen star" Veronica Lake, age 40, is working as a cocktail waitress in the Martha Washington Hotel on East 29<sup>th</sup> Street. She agrees to talk to the press who hound her after the story breaks, "but under the condition that there be absolutely 'no pictures' taken of her."<sup>45</sup>

1965: Veronica Lake, distraught at having learned of the approaching death of her lover Andy, goes on a drunken spree. Out of the "gray light through smoke" on a bar's television set, she sees a face she only identifies as "his" materialize:

[...] and I could see it so clearly and every word he said was crystal clear and I started nodding at everything he said and I was crying, sobbing so my ribs hurt and I could see so plainly his black suit and white collar and God will save us.<sup>46</sup>

She runs out into the street, lurches around until she finds a church, beats on doors and windows that nevertheless remain locked, cries and vomits and prays, "Momma, Momma, O Momma of God," until she is picked up by a policeman and taken to jail.

Maybe I died that night. Is that possible? To die standing up and crying. I think it is possible. I think I did.

(Veronica Lake, *Veronica*)

I dreamt that I was looking in a glass when a horrible face—the face of an animal—suddenly showed over my shoulder. I cannot be sure if this was a dream, or if it happened. [.] But I have always remembered the other face in the glass, whether it was a dream or a fact, and that it frightened me.

(Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*)

## Persistence of Vision

Obviously it was dangerous to stare at your eyes in mirrors too long. (Isadora Wing in Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*)

Veronica Lake once glimpsed her own image projected through the body of a tall woman she encountered in a theatre lobby. Lake, who was not quite 5' 2" and braided her hair tightly to cultivate a "mousy" look when she wanted to travel unremarked in public, passed by the "big blonde" woman, who gave her "the oh-you-poor-thing look." Lake reports thinking, "Sister, I know who you are. You're Veronica Lake, Jr."<sup>47</sup>

Half a century later, Kim Basinger stepped into the same image, complete with peek-a-boo hair, in *L. A. Confidential* (1997). The projection within the projection this time was based on the premise that men will pay for sex with prostitutes who look like movie stars. Russell Crowe as Bud, the tough cop with a heart of gold, resists this seduction and instead has consensual, non-commercial sex with Kim Basinger's character, Lynne, the prostitute with the heart of gold. It would seem, however, that no matter how these two characters try to meet each other outside of the spectral economy, the cinema pushes them back into it, in the form of those generic types wearing their hearts of gold on their sleeves, in the spectacle of the highly commercial, iconic bodies of Kim Basinger and Russell Crowe.

These images twist together in an old story still told. It is as if once put into motion, the faces on the screen must remain so, circulating and recycling infinitely. The slowly turning narrative of the cinema, its motor powered by our attraction to its images, might be described as the realization of the dream of a perpetual motion machine. As it revolves, take note, as Sullivan does, of the nameless girl he encounters in his travels: "There's always a girl in the picture." She looks out at us, one eye directed at the viewer, the other veiled to enhance her mystery. Are we looking into a mirror, or a screen? Watch the lips, and you might see her whispering:

Bloody Mary  
Bloody Mary  
Bloody Mary . . .

42 Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 69. Woolf puzzles over the fact that she cannot bear to look at herself in the mirror if others are present. The "looking-glass incident" refers to her early childhood when her stepbrother fondled her in front of a mirror that hung in the entrance hall to the family home (67-69).

43 Lake, 68.

44 Lenburg, 34-36.

45 Lenburg, 218.

46 Lake, 237.

47 Veronica Lake as told to Niven Busch, "I, Veronica Lake . . .," *Life* (17 May 1943): 77.

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1. Footnotes should be placed at end of the article, no bracket citations, no bibliography

2. Footnote format as follows:

10. Linda Williams, Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible" (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 122-3

3. Film titles in italics; character/actor citations as such:

Norman Bates/Tony Perkins

4. Extended quotations set off from body of text and single spaced, no quotation marks required.

5. Double quotation marks throughout, not single ones; Take care in the placement of quotation marks with regard to other punctuation

6. Include word length of paper.

7. Include a brief author's biography.

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